



BEYOND BELIEF

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN TIBET

free
TIBET
SHORT REPORT

Free Tibet is a London-based international campaign organisation. Our vision is a free Tibet in which Tibetans are able to determine their own future and the human rights of all are respected.

Introduction

Foreign visitors to Tibet frequently report their surprise at seeing what appears to be a thriving Tibetan Buddhist culture under China's atheist regime. Under the surface, the reality could not be more different. The US State Department's most recent report on international religious freedom describes the repression of religious freedom in Tibet as "severe", noting, among much else, "reports of extrajudicial killings, prolonged detention without trial, torture, and arrests of individuals due to their religious practices"¹. To gain a full understanding of the devastating effect of the suppression of religious freedom in Tibet, however, descriptions such as these must be understood in the context of, firstly, the deep significance of religion in Tibetan life and, secondly, the comprehensiveness and depth of the Chinese state's intrusion into Tibetan Buddhism. This short report outlines the current situation in Tibet and aims to provide that context.

Note on methodology

The task of evaluating and analysing the human rights situation inside Tibet is extremely challenging. Since the Tibetan uprising in 2008, independent international media, human rights NGOs, diplomats, government and parliamentary representatives and institutions of the United Nations have been given almost no access to Tibet by the Chinese government and no free access at all – the rare, officially sanctioned visits are tightly-controlled. Tibetan communication with the outside world is very closely monitored and Tibetans transmitting information about human rights abuses face heavy penalties.

Free Tibet's research partner, Tibet Watch (www.tibetwatch.org) promotes the human rights of the Tibetan people through monitoring, research and advocacy. It documents human rights abuse in Tibet using sources in Tibet, interviews with Tibetan refugees and monitoring of Chinese government websites and media. All of the information provided by Tibet Watch about events in Tibet is verified and corroborated as far as is possible within the limitations which apply in Tibet.

This report uses information provided by Tibet Watch, from other authoritative sources and from media reports, including Chinese state media. Examples provided are illustrative – in every case, other evidence exists in support of the reported facts.

¹ US State Department, 2015, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014 http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?dynamic_load_id=238290&year=2014#wrapper



Monk and security forces in Lhasa. Credit: Prasad Kholkute

Religion in Tibet, past and present

Religion has played an instrumental part in Tibet's culture and politics throughout its history, with national identity and religion tightly intertwined for many Tibetans. The vast majority of Tibetans practice Tibetan Buddhism and retain a deep reverence for its leader, the Dalai Lama. Consequently, Tibet's religious authorities and institutions have been identified by the Chinese government as a rival centre of power and as intrinsically disloyal to the China's central government.

Monks were well-represented in Tibet's theocratic government prior to the Chinese invasion in 1950 and monasteries were at the centre of community life. They provided education for the lay community, arbitrated disputes between neighbours and families and provided economic services such as granting loans, financing trade and offering a safety net during economic crises.

Following the invasion, the Communist Party of China (CPC) became increasingly aware that it could not co-opt Tibetan religious institutions, and following the major Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, its response was to demolish or close down monasteries and arrest monks. During Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, religious structures were torn down in huge numbers and monks were tortured, incarcerated or forced to join work units. Following Mao's death in 1976 and the introduction of a new constitution enshrining religious freedom in China in 1982, Tibetans rapidly returned to religious practice and, despite monitoring and control by the authorities, religious institutions once again adopted a political role, defending Tibetan national identity and resisting Chinese rule. Monks and nuns led and participated in significant protests in the 1980s and many further protests in the following decades.

In March 2008, a protest by 300 monks in the streets of Lhasa triggered the largest and most widespread protests in Tibet for nearly 50 years. China responded with heavy, sometimes lethal, force, arresting, torturing and jailing an estimated 6,800 Tibetan protesters and killing at least 227². Monks were heavily involved in the organisation of many protests and suffered the consequences as monasteries were closed down or occupied by military forces. In Labrang Monastery alone, 280 monks were arrested for their role in the protests. Across Tibet, many of those jailed in 2008 remain in prison. Ever since the uprising, monasteries and monks have been subjected to a stifling level of surveillance, regulation and control.

Despite these restrictions, monasteries today remain one of the few institutions in Tibet that have legitimacy for Tibetans, in contrast to the regional and local governments, the judiciary and the

² '2008 Uprising in Tibet: Chronology and Analysis', Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, 2008, <http://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/tibetprotest2008.pdf>

security services. Due to their natural position at the centre of their communities, Tibet's monks and nuns continue to be heavily involved in defending Tibetan language and culture, planning and leading protests, educating Tibetans about the social and environment impacts of the occupation and in sending information about Tibet to the outside world. The political, cultural and spiritual functions of religion in Tibet are all perceived by China's government as threats to its rule.

Religion and the state

CONSTITUTION OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (1982)

Article 36

Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief... The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.³

The Chinese state is intimately involved in the management of religious affairs through, at the highest level, the national bureaucracies of the United Front Work Department and the State Agency for Religious Affairs in Beijing. Tibetan Buddhism has official recognition and even receives limited state support in the form of funding to help renovate or maintain monasteries and maintain religious artefacts. China's government boasts of respect for and protection of Tibetan Buddhism⁴, which remains openly practised and highly visible throughout Tibet.

Neither this support nor the provisions of the Chinese constitution equate to religious freedom. In a speech on religious policy in April 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping reminded members of the Chinese Communist Party that they should act as "unyielding Marxist atheists" and emphasised that China should guard against "overseas infiltrations via religious means and prevent ideological infringement by extremists." In his own blunt words, "religious groups... must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China."⁵

Control of religious institutions

State control of religion in Tibet takes form in a range of coercive measures imposed on Tibetan lay people, pilgrims, monastic institutions and the clergy. Local authorities take a direct role in the management of monasteries through "management committees" controlled by local officials and Party cadres, which assume temporal and even spiritual responsibilities formerly held by monks⁶. Under the "nine must-haves" (jiuyou) campaign, introduced in 2011, monasteries are required to possess nine items to promote CPC objectives. These mandatory items include facilities to open monasteries up to the outside world such as telephone connections and televisions, and also include items that demonstrate loyalty to China and the CPC⁷. Monasteries are required to fly Chinese flags and have portraits of the leaders of the CPC. Chinese authorities have also removed

3 'Constitution of the People's Republic of China' <http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html>

4 The Fourth World Buddhist Forum, <http://www.wbfls.org/ent/>

5 Hong Kong Free Press 24 April 2016 <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/04/24/religious-groups-must-adhere-to-the-leadership-of-the-communist-party-pres-xi-jinping/>

6 Human Rights Watch, 16 March 2012 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/16/china-tibetan-monasteries-placed-under-direct-rule>

7 'China: Attempts to Seal Off Tibet from Outside Information', Human Rights Watch, 13 July 2012 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/13/china-attempts-seal-tibet-outside-information>

powers from monasteries, assuming control themselves over internal affairs such as the admission and teaching of monks and nuns, the number of monks that can stay in a monastery and also ruling on spiritual matters such as reincarnation. The goal was expressed by Party Secretary of Tibet, Chen Quanguo, in 2015: Tibet's monasteries should act as centres of Chinese patriotism and be run as "model harmonious monasteries", allowing Tibet's monks to "have a personal feeling of the party and government's care and warmth" and behave in a "patriotic and law-abiding" manner⁸.

The involvement of some monasteries in overtly political activities and the participation of more than 60 monks and nuns in Tibet's 142 confirmed self-immolation protests⁹ have provided a pretext for surveillance and control not just by local authorities but by organs of state security. Surveillance cameras and even police stations are located inside and close to monasteries and regular inspections to monitor signs of loyalty to the Dalai Lama take place. When unrest occurs in any Tibetan area, the security spotlight will fall on its religious institutions. Following political disturbances in Driru County in the Tibet Autonomous Region in 2013, a swathe of arrests of monks and nuns for both participating in protest and for allegedly planning future protests took place in the area¹⁰. The local nunnery was also subject to what local officials described as "cleaning up", a process leading eventually to the expulsion of "unauthorised" nuns, the destruction of their living quarters and "patriotic re-education"¹¹.



The remains of nuns' quarters at Jadhpa Gon Palden Ghatso nunnery, Driru county, after their demolition, November 2015

Patriotic re-education remains a central feature of the state's control over religion¹². Teams of officials and party cadres subject monks and nuns to propaganda and compel them to agree that Tibet is an inalienable part of China or denounce the Dalai Lama¹³. Monks and nuns that have refused to sign documents denouncing the Dalai Lama and accepting China's version of history have been detained, tortured and/or forced to leave their monastic institutions¹⁴.

Monks and nuns are at particular risk of prosecution for "attempting to split the Chinese state", a broadly defined state security crime that in practice is used to punish Tibetans for such offences as organising demonstrations, communicating with the outside world or possessing images of the Dalai Lama. Penalties for "splittism" are severe. In 2013 Thardhod Gyaltsen, a monk and chant leader from Drongna Monastery in Driru County, was arrested and later sentenced to 18 years in prison under China's state security laws after police found prohibited images of the Dalai Lama and recordings of his speeches and teachings during a raid on the monastery¹⁵. While exact figures are unknown, monks and nuns form a significant proportion of Tibet's approximately 1,800 political prisoners¹⁶.

8 Michelle Florcruz, 'Communist Party Doctrine' IBTimes, 8 April 2015 www.ibtimes.com/chinas-government-wants-test-tibetan-monks-communist-party-doctrine-187499 ; 'China to test Tibetan monks and nuns for patriotism', The Guardian, 8 April 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/08/china-to-test-tibetan-monks-and-nuns-for-patriotism>

9 As of April 2016. Full list: Free Tibet <http://www.freetibet.org/about/self-immolation-protests>

10 Tibet Watch, 2014, Driru County: the new hub of Tibetan resistance http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/driru_county_thematic_report.pdf

11 Free Tibet, 9 November 2015 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/106-nuns-expelled-nunnery>

12 Free Tibet, 26 November 2015 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/tibetan-monks-be-educated-against-separatism>

13 Example of patriotic re-education materials in Tibet Watch, 2007, No faith in the state <http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/nofaithfinal.pdf>

14 *ibid*

15 Free Tibet press release, 1 April 2014 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/pr/eighteen-year-sentence-tibetan-monk-accused-separatism>

16 Total numbers are unknown as information about prisoner releases is very difficult to obtain from Chinese or Tibetan sources. The India-based Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy maintains a database recording all known cases <http://epotala.com/tchrd/political-prisoner-db/>

In prison, monks and nuns face a significant risk of torture. Monk Golog Jigme who escaped to exile in 2014 describes being chained to the chimney of a burning stove, shocked with an electric baton in his mouth and being hung for hours by his handcuffs, his toes barely touching the floor¹⁷. Deaths in custody are common, including Tsering Gyaltzen whose back was reportedly broken in detention in 2012¹⁸ and senior monk Ngawang Jamyang from Driru, whose beaten body was returned to his family in December 2013 after a month in detention¹⁹.

In recent years, monasteries have faced a new threat to their way of life. The push by the Chinese government to promote Tibet as a tourist destination has resulted in “renovations” intended to turn them into tourist sites, including being modified to create space for restaurants, hotels and shops. Monks have reported huge numbers of tourists coming to their monasteries on a daily basis, disturbing their studies and way of life²⁰.



Security forces at the Monlan Prayer festival, March 2015

Religious restrictions in everyday life

As religious observance is central to the lives of many Tibetans and relationships with religious institutions remain significant in many communities, restrictions on religious freedom have a direct and significant impact on lay people. The restrictions they face can be both petty and fundamental. Tibetan pilgrims have been forbidden from building monuments or carving unauthorised *mani* stones - a devotional object in Tibetan Buddhism that consists of stones with Buddhist mantras carved into the surface. Pilgrimages to sacred sites are strictly controlled and it has become almost impossible for Tibetans to obtain permission to attend

17 Tibet Watch, 2015, Blood on the Snows: Torture in Tibet 2008-2015 http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/blood_on_the_snows.pdf

18 ibid

19 ibid

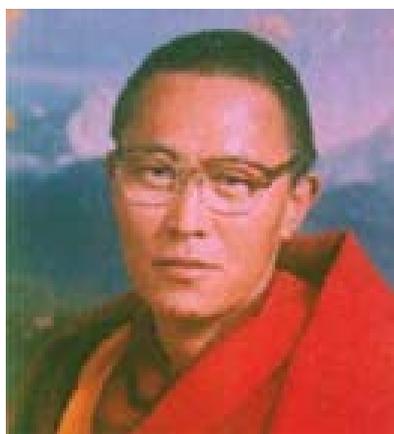
20 Dan Levin, 'Tibetans Call China's Policies at Tourist Spot Tacit but Stifling', New York Times, 24 October 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/25/world/asia/tibetan-monks-describe-a-web-of-unseen-controls.html>

religious teachings outside China. Mining or other resource exploitation on sacred sites is commonly permitted and often provokes protest – for instance, it was the trigger for the cycle of repression in Driru County described above²¹.

Large gatherings of Tibetans are perceived as a threat by the authorities. As a result, security forces are usually present at prayer festivals and other religious gatherings, and often deployed in intimidating force, such as at the Monlam prayer festival at Kumbum monastery in 2015²². In July 2013, Chinese security forces opened fire on a crowd in Tawu County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, that had gathered to celebrate the Dalai Lama's birthday. One monk was shot in the head and at least six others received gunshot wounds²³.



Nun Dolma Butri, injured in Tawu shooting incident, July 2013



Tenzin Delek Rinpoche

Funerals can represent a similar threat. The bodies of self-immolation protesters who die at the scene or in custody are often cremated by police to prevent normal religious ceremonies. When high-profile political prisoner Tenzin Delek Rinpoche died in July 2015, his body was cremated in the prison against his family's wishes and his ashes later taken back from them at gunpoint. Local authorities in his home area issued an order prohibiting any prayer services²⁴.

China has criminalised possession of images of the Dalai Lama, his teachings or calling for his return to Tibet. A visit to any Tibetan household or business outside China's jurisdiction will confirm how ubiquitous images of the Dalai Lama would be inside Tibet without that prohibition. While rigorously enforced in the western Tibet Autonomous Region, in eastern parts of Tibet the ban is sometimes openly flouted without penalty – but always remains available to the authorities as a mechanism of repression. In February 2016 in Drango County, a public order threatened local people with “severe punishment” if they did not hand in pictures of the Dalai Lama, which had previously been openly displayed. The new policy followed a defiant public prayer ceremony for the Dalai Lama's health while he was undergoing medical treatment in the USA²⁵.

Reincarnation

Arguably the most consequential form of control exercised by the Chinese government over religion in Tibet has been the decision by the central state to take control of all matters related to reincarnation. *Rinpoches*, individuals identified as reincarnations of deceased spiritual teachers and leaders, occupy central roles in Tibetan Buddhist clergy, including its most senior leaders. In 2007 the Chinese State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5, known as

21 Tibet Watch, 2014, Driru County: the new hub of Tibetan resistance http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/driru_county_thematic_report.pdf

22 Free Tibet, 6 March 2015 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/chinas-display-force-tibetan-religious-festival>

23 Free Tibet press release, 17 July 2013 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/pr/tibetans-tortured-detention-following-shooting-dalai-lama-birthday-celebrations>

24 Tibet Watch, 2015, Blood on the Snows: Torture in Tibet 2008-2015 http://www.tibetwatch.org/uploads/2/4/3/4/24348968/blood_on_the_snows.pdf

25 Free Tibet, 3 February 2016 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/severe-punishments-dalai-lama-photos>

“Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism”, established that all *Rinpoches* would be subject to the approval of the Chinese government. In 2010 it began issuing certificates to confirm that these monks were “living Buddhas” (a Chinese-imposed description never used by Tibetans)²⁶.

These measures were reinforced in January 2016 by the State Administration of Religious Affairs when it issued a full online database of the official *Rinpoches*, identified by name, date of birth, monastery and with a picture and unique certificate number. The stated aim of the list is to prevent so-called “fake living Buddhas” from tricking people, thus protecting both China’s lay community and Tibetan Buddhism itself. Zhu Weiqun, Chairperson of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee, told Chinese state media in December 2015 that “fake living Buddhas” were a threat to national security²⁷. The Dalai Lama described the State Order No 5 as “brazen meddling” that would be impossible for Tibetan Buddhists to acknowledge or accept²⁸.

China’s strategy for the Dalai Lama

For China, the most difficult political and security challenge in the religious sphere is the almost universal devotion felt by Tibetans for the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the 14th Dalai Lama (who is notably absent from its list of authentic *Rinpoches*, on the non-religious grounds that he betrayed his homeland)²⁹. In 2011, the Dalai Lama renounced any political role in the exile government of Tibet but his official status as a purely religious figure has done nothing to ease China’s headaches.



Celebrations for the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday, Amdo, Tibet

The exile of the Dalai Lama from Tibet remains one of Tibetans’ deepest grievances under Chinese rule. Tibetan protesters – including many self-immolators – consistently call for his return and it is a subject addressed, often obliquely to avoid censorship, in Tibetan songs, poems, blogs and other writings. For China, however, despite the consequential anger among Tibetans, demonization of the Dalai Lama has become routine. A recent state media article reported the view of one Beijing academic that for “Chinese” people, displaying his image was akin to Americans having pictures of Saddam Hussein³⁰– another accused him of sympathy for Islamic State³¹.

While these measures aim – and fail - to break the bond between Tibetans and their exiled spiritual leader, China also has a longer term strategy – to control the appointment of his successor. Although Beijing sees the current Dalai Lama as the leader of the resistance to its rule, its plans to co-opt Tibetan Buddhism nevertheless require that the position is not eliminated altogether and that there will be a Dalai Lama who adheres to Beijing’s demands.

26 Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism’, from Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 18 July 2007 <http://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/measures-on-the-management-of-the-reincarnation-of-living-buddhas-in-0>

27 ‘China’s register of reincarnations’, Free Tibet, 19 January 2016 <http://freetibet.org/news-media/na/china-launches-list-authorized-living-buddhas>

28 ‘Reincarnation’, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, 24 September 2011 <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/statement-of-his-holiness-the-fourteenth-dalai-lama-tenzin-gyatso-on-the-issue-of-his-reincarnation>

29 ‘为何活佛查询系统中查不到十四世达赖喇嘛?’, tibet.cn, 19 January 2016 <http://www.tibet.cn/news/focus/1453176923579.shtml>

30 ‘Dalai Lama portraits confiscated in China: report’, AFP, 3 February 2016 <https://www.yahoo.com/news/dalai-lama-portraits-confiscated-china-report-054059923.html?ref=gs>

31 ‘China denounces Dalai Lama’s ‘sympathy’ for Islamic State’, Reuters, 9 December 2015 <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-idUSKBNOTSOD220151209>

Party officials responded angrily after the Dalai Lama publicly speculated he could be the last in the chain of reincarnations that have taken place since the 13th century. On behalf of the central government, Zhu Weiqun stated that any process that took place to identify the next Dalai Lama other than one officially mandated by the government would be illegal, along with the resulting Dalai Lama. He labelled the idea a “dual betrayal, both politically and religiously”³². Padma Choling, Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region People’s Congress Standing Committee called the Dalai Lama’s suggestion that he may not reincarnate “blasphemy against... Tibetan Buddhism”, bluntly adding that the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation was “not up to the Dalai Lama.”³³



Shoton Festival, Drepung Monastery, August 2012

The use of the reincarnation system for political aims by the Chinese government has a precedent all Tibetans know very well. In 1995, China abducted Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, a six-year-old boy who had been identified by the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama, generally considered the second-highest religious figure in Tibet. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima has not been seen in public since, with the Chinese authorities providing no information on his status or location. Instead, Beijing appointed its own choice as Panchen Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu. Despite being widely rejected by Tibetans as the “fake Panchen Lama”, China has given Gyaltzen Norbu an increasingly high profile role in religious and political affairs in Tibet – under instruction

to stay loyal to the CPC. In November 2015, Party Secretary of Tibet, Chen Quanguo advised him to “draw a clear line” between himself and the Dalai Lama, telling him that he should show loyalty to China and help protect its national unity³⁴.

Highly conscious of this precedent, the Dalai Lama, the prime authority on current Tibetan Buddhist practice, has laid out clearly the process for his succession. He has said he will consult with religious authorities and Tibetans on whether there should be a 15th Dalai Lama and if the institution is to continue, will leave clear instructions on the process to identify his reincarnation. He has stated clearly that;

*apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People’s Republic of China.*³⁵

A Chinese-appointed Dalai Lama would be universally rejected by Tibetans. The gravest insult to their religion could be yet to come.

32 ‘Xinhua Insight: Exposing the myth of Dalai Lama’s reincarnation’, Xinhua 19 July 2015 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/in-depth/2015-07/19/c_134426001.htm

33 ‘Tibetan official defends reincarnation system, slams Dalai Lama’, Xinhua 9 March 2015 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/09/c_134051882.htm

34 ‘China’s Tibet party boss urges senior monk to shun Dalai Lama’, Reuters, 8 December 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-idUSKBN0TR0QW20151208>

35 Dalai Lama statement <http://www.dalailama.com/messages/statement-of-his-holiness-the-fourteenth-dalai-lama-tenzin-gyatso-on-the-issue-of-his-reincarnation>

Conclusion

Religion is one of the most distinctive and important aspects of Tibet's unique culture. For China's government, however, religion in Tibet is a political and security issue, and control of religious institutions, clergy and practice is central to its policy for eliminating Tibetan resistance to its rule. All aspects of Tibetan Buddhism are subject to state interference whenever, wherever and however it is considered necessary. For individual Tibetans, particularly monks and nuns, the consequence of this policy can be persecution under the full force of China's security apparatus.

Religious freedom in Tibet is a fiction. Instead, China exercises root and branch control over Tibetan religious life – control sustained by the threat and use of state violence and a punitive legal system. Across China itself, since President Xi Jinping assumed power, religious institutions and communities face increasing restrictions. In such a climate, and in the context of China's decades-long sensitivity and intransigence regarding Tibet's political status, free religious observance is impossible in Tibet and there are no indications that the policy is likely to change.

Recommendations for governments

- **Press the Chinese government to ratify and implement in full the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), including all its provisions on religious freedom.**
- **Call on China to allow religious institutions in Tibet complete autonomy over their temporal and religious affairs, including the appointment and recognition of Rinpoches and other officials, including the Dalai Lama.**
- **State publicly that they will not recognise the legitimacy or status of any Dalai Lama appointed by the Chinese government.**
- **Call for the release of all monks, nuns and other religious figures imprisoned for their religious activities or for engagement in peaceful political activities to which they are entitled under the provisions of the ICCPR.**



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