



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Tibet Uprising 1956–59

Executive Summary

China invaded and occupied Tibet in 1951. At the time of the rebellion, Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, had been under the control of the People's Republic of China since the Seventeen Point Agreement imposed in 1951. This was an agreement that was signed by a Tibetan delegation in Beijing under duress, which ceded control of Tibet to China.¹ The main instigator of the uprising was a rumor that Chinese authorities planned to kidnap the Dalai Lama.² At first, the uprising mostly consisted of peaceful protests, but the Chinese People's Liberation Army started to use force to address the protests, which led to some of the protesters taking up arms. In 1956, the Chinese launched the notorious "democratic reforms" in Kham, southeastern Tibet, and Amdo, northeastern Tibet.³ The Chinese imposed their ideology on Tibetans and waged an anti-religion campaign targeting spiritual figures, monastic institutions, cultural practices, and places of worship, which led the Dalai Lama to flee into exile.⁴

The People's Republic of China continued to claim Tibet as part of its territory in accordance with its constitution, contrary to the claims of the Dalai Lama's Central Tibetan Administration that established Tibetan independence. Communist ideology was not the only factor that led Mao Zedong to make the liberation of Tibet one of his priorities—there was also the need to maintain national pride, as China had suffered numerous humiliations during the previous century at the hands of the British, the Japanese, and other foreign powers.⁵

Chinese authorities interpreted the uprising as a revolt by the Tibetan elite against Communist reforms that they believed were improving the lives of the Tibetan people. The reforms that were imposed by the Chinese and accompanied by propaganda campaigns against traditional Tibetan society and religions left some Tibetans feeling that everything they held dear was under attack.⁶ Tibetan and third-party sources interpreted the uprising as a popular revolt against an unwelcome Chinese presence. Tensions had been building between the Tibetans and the Chinese authorities due to the Chinese government's implementation of various policies that infringed upon Tibetan autonomy and culture, including attempts to suppress religious practices associated with Tibetan Buddhism. The revolt, which spread across eastern Tibet, temporarily managed to expel the Chinese from the region.⁷ However, the Chinese army returned in greater numbers, and the Tibetan fighters retreated toward central Tibet where the "democratic reforms" had not yet been implemented.⁸ The resistance lasted from 1956 to 1959, when the rebellion was crushed.⁹

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. China, at the time of the conflict, would be considered a nation. The enclave of Tibet was also a nation at the time of conflict—a nation within a nation. After the Chinese takeover, the Tibetans became a minority in their own country as a Chinese policy of the resettlement of ethnic Chinese into Tibet was enacted.¹⁰

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

Yes. The majority of the people of China believed the communist Chinese government of Mao Zedong to be legitimately in power. The Tibetan people saw their own government as legitimate until it was dissolved by the Chinese government. Perhaps the most significant nonviolent action of the Tibetan government during this period was the establishment of a Tibetan government in exile.¹¹

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

Yes. Under the parameters and definitions in use by the Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC), the study views China as the country in question and the Tibetan population as a fraction thereof. Another valid interpretation of the conflict is that Tibet was a sovereign nation, and it was invaded by another nation, China, making this an international conflict. For the purposes of this analysis, the study has considered the conflict from the former standpoint. The Tibetan rebels did not have contact with the Chinese population outside of Tibet, so the Chinese government, in effect, controlled and secured more than 85 percent *of the population of China*. The Chinese government subsequently consolidated its control over Tibet, dissolved the Tibetan government, and implemented a series of policies aimed at assimilating Tibet into the People's Republic of China. All traditional Tibetan forms of government were eradicated. The real power lay in the PLA's Military Control Committee headed by Zhang Guohua, one of the generals who had come to Lhasa in 1951. For many years to come, Tibet would be run by the military as a *de facto* police state.¹²

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

No. The government of India offered asylum to the Dalai Lama when he fled Tibet, and tens of thousands of Tibetans followed the Dalai Lama into exile. However, Tibetan guerillas did not operate from bases in India or establish external sanctuary there. In 1960, the Dalai Lama established his government in exile in Dharamsala, a former British hill station in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.¹³

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. China had a large and well-organized military at the start of the conflict.¹⁴

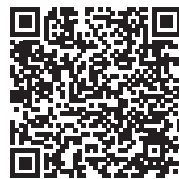
TIBET UPRISING 1956–59	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	YES
POPULATION SECURITY	YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Outcome

In the space of a few years, the Chinese government effectively ended the dominance of monks and monasteries in Tibet. Thousands of Tibetan monks were executed or arrested, and monasteries and temples around the city were looted or destroyed. Of the 2,500 monasteries that existed in 1959, only 70 remained open by 1962, a loss of 97 percent in less than three years.¹⁵ Compared to pre-1959 levels, only 1 out of 20 monks are still allowed to practice under the government’s watch.¹⁶ 85,000–87,000 Tibetans perished during the rebellion, according to “secret Chinese documents captured by guerrillas.”¹⁷ Around 2,000 PLA soldiers were killed in the uprising, and “famines appeared for the first time in recorded history, natural resources were devastated, and wildlife depleted to extinction.”¹⁸ Over one million Tibetans perished from 1959 to 1979 as a direct result of the political instability, executions, imprisonments, and large-scale famine engendered by the policies of the People’s Republic of China in Tibet.¹⁹ China still occupies Tibet, and the central region of Tibet is now an autonomous region within China, known as the Tibet Autonomous Region. This outcome of the conflict supports the Five Factors theory.

Endnotes

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5. Sam van Schaik, *Tibet: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 210.
6. van Schaik, *Tibet*, 242.
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18. “China/Tibet (1950–present),” University of Central Arkansas (website), n.d., accessed August 2023, <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/asiapacific-region/chinatibet-1950-present/>; and Tenzin Yiga, “62nd Anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising Day,” Cat’s Eye View (website), April 8, 2021, <https://brhscatseyeview.org/11291/news/opinion/62nd-anniversary-of-the-1959-tibetan-uprising-day/>.
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