

This campaign is directed at ordinary Tibetans from all walks of life, not just government officials. Its aim, according to the announcements that have accompanied the campaign, is to diminish the respect of farmers and herdsmen for religious leaders and to discourage reliance on religion.

Perhaps the best single illustration of both the aims and consequences of Chinese religious policy in Tibet is the controversy surrounding the selection of the Panchen Lama. This too has resulted in the further expulsion of monks and nuns, arrests and imprisonment, the closing of monasteries and nunneries, and the flight of monks and nuns into exile -- including senior religious figures who have attempted for years to work with the Chinese government. It also has led to the imprisonment of a six year-old boy -- Gendun Choekyi Nyima -- and his entire family. They have been held now for almost four years. They are guilty of no crime whatsoever. They have been allowed no visitors and their fate is unknown.

Here is some background to the controversy. In May, 1995, the Dalai Lama in exile confirmed the selection of a boy from a nomad family living inside Tibet as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama who had died in 1989. The name of this boy had been submitted to the Dalai Lama by a search committee formed by the Panchen Lama's monastery, Tashilhunpo, near Shigatse. It is long-standing Tibetan religious tradition that the selection of a Panchen Lama must be confirmed by the Dalai Lama. This search committee had cooperated from the outset with the Chinese government, and operated under their auspices.

Examining the chronology of events going back to the hard-line policy on religion enunciated by the Third Work Forum, it is clear that the issue was not just that the Dalai Lama had announced his confirmation of the original choice independently of the Chinese government. The Dalai Lama clearly felt that he had no choice but to go ahead with the confirmation regardless of the Chinese government's wishes. The Chinese government had made its intention clear to Chadrel Rinpoche, the head of the search committee and abbot of Tashilhunpo monastery, that the final selection would be made by lottery from a list of names of several candidates. To do so would thus exclude the Dalai Lama from any religious role in the selection and establish the Chinese government as the final arbiter of religious tradition.

This lottery procedure proposed by the Chinese government has no legitimacy among Tibetans, nor was it used in the selection of the last Panchen Lama. The Chinese government was attempting to resurrect an antique procedure invented by a Manchu Emperor in the late 18th century as a way of validating its authority over Tibetan religion. Thus, we have here the bizarre spectacle of an officially atheist government determining the procedure for the selection of a religious leader.

Chadrel Rinpoche was immediately arrested. He was sentenced last May to 6 years in prison, along with his assistant. A work team was sent to Tashilhunpo monastery. From that monastery alone some 32 monks were arrested for refusing to denounce Chadrel