

THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS IN TIBET PROTEST FOR LANGUAGE RIGHTS

SUMMARY

In the fall of 2010, the provincial government of Qinghai decided to replace Tibetan with Mandarin as the primary language of instruction in all schools in the region, even though the law had specific provisions prohibiting the elimination of minority languages (like Tibetan). The decision prompted a week of protests by Tibetan students across Qinghai, the largest demonstrations since the March 2008 uprising in Tibet. Beginning in Rebkong, thousands of marchers from six schools took to the streets on October 19th, dressed in their school uniforms and carrying banners calling for “Equality of Nationalities” and to “Expand the Use of Tibetan Language.” There were some monks who joined the march as well and at one point, protesters were surrounded by police vehicles. Regional officials arrived, calling for calm.



Source: rangzen.net



Source: RFA

While most students in Rebkong went back to class the next day, a call to action had been circulating over SMS text message and at least 8,000 students took to the streets in Chabcha County on October 20th. Nonviolent protests continued to spread across the province over the next week, sometimes with hundreds of students and sometimes thousands. While students took the lead, teachers provided support in various ways, in the streets and in a formal letter to the Qinghai authorities. A group of Tibetan elders, including former officials in the Chinese government and educators from Qinghai, also sent a detailed petition to the provincial education department arguing against the reforms. Throughout the protests, some local and regional Chinese officials tried to assure demonstrators that their concerns had been heard and that the policies would not change while they were in charge. Meanwhile, security forces escalated their presence in the protest areas and students at times were investigated, detained, and expelled.

The initial round of protests ended on October 26, 2010, when school administrators convinced students that more Tibetan language instruction would take place in schools. This did not end up happening, though, and spoken language and textbooks continued to change to Mandarin. As a result, a new wave of student protests occurred in 2012 and 2014, and Tibetan youth continue to struggle for their legal right to learn in their own language.

ISSUE

In October 2010, the education department of Qinghai Province proposed a policy to reform textbooks and teach all school courses in Mandarin. Around 70% of students in the province were Tibetan, so this was in direct opposition to the laws of the region mandating that Tibetan language be used in schools of Tibetan students. Such a loss of primary language education would erode Tibetan culture, language, and national identity. It also meant job losses for Tibetan teachers.

WHO

Tibetan high school and grade school students in Tibet, some as young as eleven years old

WHERE

Mahlo Prefecture in Qinghai province (Amdo, Tibet)

GOALS

The primary goal of the protests was to secure the right to use Tibetan as the main language in Tibetan schools. As the movement spread to Chabcha (Gonghe) County, some other goals were put forth:

1. Return the authority of the Tibetan language
2. Equality among nationalities
3. Expand the use of Tibetan language

STRATEGY

Students used a grassroots strategy of building pressure on the authorities as well as a legal strategy of framing the use of Mandarin in Tibetan schools as a violation of China's constitution.

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

It is unclear to what degree the protests were planned. They started in Rebkong with six different schools participating and reports of up to 7,000 students marching, as well as some monks. Over a week, the movement spread to multiple areas of Qinghai and even Beijing. It is unclear how the organizing happened in each area, though it is known that word was spread through a viral cell phone text message calling for support of the student protests and the Tibetan language.



Source: SFTHQ

The viral SMS said:
"Yesterday, the Ministry of Education decided that the Tibetan language centered education system should be cancelled in all schools in Tibetan areas...Tibetan students are protesting for their mother tongue in the Tibetan areas in Qinghai and others. For the sake of saving the Tibetan mother tongue, please pass the message to each other."

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed in terms of the constitutional rights of students and the negative impact of not using the local language (Tibetan) for education. The constitution for Malho Prefecture said that courses must be taught in Tibetan for Tibetan schools and that Mandarin should be taught as a language course. Students, teachers, and former government officials used this legal framework to challenge the proposed policy, as well as citing the widely held notion that teaching in the language most easily understood by students creates the best learning environment.

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Leaders and Participants:

- Thousands of elementary and high school students across Qinghai Province, starting in Rebkong and spreading to Chabcha (Gonghe) County, Tsolho, Golok, Tawo (Dawu), Chenza, Tsigorhang Khrigha, Drakar, and Themchen Tsongon
- Teachers marching and writing a letter in support of the students
- Monks joining the protests, though at first, students asked them not to, fearing a stronger backlash from security forces if monks were present

Allies:

- Tibetans who were formerly officials in the Chinese government and educators from Qinghai sending a detailed petition to the provincial Education Department arguing against the new policy
- Four members of the United Nations Human Rights Council issuing an urgent appeal to the Chinese government on the negative impacts of the policies
- Tibetan students holding solidarity protests at the Minorities University of China in Beijing
- Students from Tsayi, Sangchu County, Labrang voicing support for the student protest
- Organizations like Students for a Free Tibet, International Campaign for Tibet, and Free Tibet organizing demonstrations and urging world leaders to take action

TARGET

Local and regional authorities, including members of the provincial Education Department and Qinghai Province's Party Secretary



OPPONENT(S)

- 1) Local and regional authorities, including members of the provincial Education Department and Qinghai Province's Party Secretary
- 2) Local and regional police and security forces

TACTICS

- Street marches and rallies in school clothes, with banners in Tibetan and Mandarin
- Petition to provincial government from Tibetan former government officials and educators
- Formal letter to the Qinghai authorities from more than 300 Tibetan teachers in Qinghai

Protests became dispersed across the province as more students took to the streets. The risk associated with concentrated marches was high, though security forces have generally been less aggressive with student rallies in Tibet and this remained the case. The solidarity of United Nations officials, the teachers, and former government officials and educators gave the students' demands extra credibility and publicity, and thus provided a certain degree of political space and protection.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

- For the first march in Rebkong, twenty-thirty police vehicles arrived on the scene and surrounded the protesters, though no arrests were made. Prefecture officials also arrived to urge calm.
- Troops and security forces were increased in the protest areas. While they maintained relative restraint, there were multiple reports that students were being investigated, expelled, and held at schools over the weekends as punishment.
- At least twenty students from a middle school in Chabcha were arrested.
- The Director General of the Education Department and a local Governor visited one of the schools in Rebkong, stating that they would stop changes to the language policy while they were in office. They also stated that if protests continued, the leaders would be expelled from school.
- While students and international organizations indicated that protesters were being investigated and some had been detained, Chinese officials denied this, insisting that all grievances had been discussed and satisfactorily addressed. This was clearly untrue as protests continued.

MEDIA & MESSAGING

The students' message was clear and consistent, using such slogans as:

In Tibet: "Equality of ethnicities, freedom of language" "Expand the Use of the Tibetan Language" "Return the authority of the Tibetan language" "Equality of People, Freedom of Language"

In Beijing: "Preserve National Language and Expand National Education"

Even with a media blackout in Tibet, there was coverage of the protests both inside and outside of China, particularly through images on social media, but also in international outlets like The Guardian and Radio Free Asia. It is unclear if the students were able to reach out to the press. Tibet Support Groups were able to receive reports from inside Tibet and spread information as well, using it to pressure institutions like the United Nations.



OUTCOMES

The protests drew local, national, and international attention to the issue of Tibetan language rights. However, concrete gains were limited. Students stopped the 2010 protests after a week, told by school administrators that Tibetan language instruction would be used in schools and giving up the power they had built through mass action. A few days later, the Qinghai Director of Education said, "In places where conditions are not ripe, the authorities won't forcefully push the reforms." This left a lot of room for manipulation and students have reported that Mandarin continues to be favored and Tibetan language use has not increased.

Because of this, further language rights protests occurred in Qinghai in 2012 and 2014. To combat the loss of Tibetan education, many areas in Tibet have established parallel institutions for teaching Tibetan, such as informal community schools and after-hour classes in monastic courtyards, etc. These schools are an important protector of culture and language, even as they are frequently harassed or shut down by local Chinese officials.



Source: freetibet.org