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Robert Barnett on the Qinghai Earthquake

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Interview with Robert Barnett on Yushu’s earthquake political implications (April 16th)

Brice Pedroletti: What can we expect the political mood to be in the Tibetan population as well as among the monks, towards the Chinese authorities, over one year after the dozens of demonstrations that happened in Qinghai (and other bordering Tibetan regions)?

Robert Barnett: Generally, there is likely to be normal gratitude from Tibetans for any help they receive from the Chinese government or Chinese people whatever the past history has been, and this is likely to happen. This is seen as an important opportunity for China, and both the government and ordinary Chinese are seizing this opportunity very consciously to try to repair past wounds. The People’s Daily even called me yesterday just to point this out and to check that I recognised Chinese goodwill. But this relationship is very fragile and if there is any error or cultural insensitivity, the situation could change very easily. And to be honest, the history of modern Chinese-Tibetan relations is basically a history of cycles of extreme generosity by the Chinese side, as they see it, followed by sometimes extreme tension when there is any criticism or perceived lack of gratitude. First the Chinese gave Tibetans autonomy in 1951, then demanded that Tibet’s prime minister be sacked, leading to major tensions; in 1959 China gave Tibetan peasants land, but then withdrew their rights to practice religion and culture; in 1980 China gave all Tibetans modernization but then said since 1994 that they could not pray to the Dalai Lama or in many cases practice Buddhism at all. So it is not that one should doubt Chinese generosity at all — the problem in the past has been how the Party and the Chinese people respond if there is any criticism.

BP: Which aspects of the rescue operations, and the presence of the army and police, could lead to misunderstandings, tensions and clashes with the local populations?

RB: The first problem is that no rescuers arrived for 6-8 hours even though there is a major military base nearby. This was a serious issue among local people on the first day and [I think] it seems possible it will be remembered.

Now there are many rescuers, it’s very impressive. But there are risks of problems. First, there is not enough food. There have been several fights already and at least five arrests over stampedes by desperate people trying to get food or tents.

Second, there seems to be too little medical treatment and apparently too few doctors. [Editor’s note: as of April 19th, extensive food supplies have reached the main town and the PLA has been able to set up a field hospital.]

Then, the rescuers are concentrating on concrete buildings, for good reasons, but it seems less work is done in the areas of town where just Tibetans live.

There are reports about tensions over funeral practices, which are very important in any culture.

There are [very] serious discrepancies over official numbers of the dead — the Chinese government say 790 have died but many Tibetans say there are 1,000 bodies at Jyeku monastery alone, and many others at other monasteries. [Editor’s note: the official death toll has now been raised to 1944.] We don’t know if the Chinese decision to have political leaders visit the town is helping or not, since probably food and medicine might be seen as more of a priority by some people.

There could also be tensions over the fact that Chinese officials and journalists, and the western journalists who imitate them without reflection, almost never refer to this area as a Tibetan area —
which is how it is meant to be officially described by China — but only as “North western China” or “Qinghai” with some “Tibetan majority”. This is like referring to Scotland as “Northern Britain” or to Alaska as “the USA”. It will only inflame tensions. It’s not “Tibet” in Chinese eyes but it is officially recognized as “a Tibetan area” in terms of culture and history and it is important to respect local sentiments by acknowledging this.

**BP:** It’s been reported that Tibetan monks have acted quickly to help people. Is there a potential here for tensions, as there might be a clash of legitimacy?

**RB:** The quick action of the monks to try to rescue people has huge potential for cooperation with the government rescuers, but this is a very difficult situation, with many people in desperate pain and suffering, and we can see that the Chinese authorities are very keen to maintain control and desperate to show that it is the state that is the main provider of benefit to Tibetans. So although the Chinese officials will try to cooperate with the monks, the potential for tension and conflict is very high indeed.

**BP:** Is the policy to settle nomads a matter that could somehow be blamed for aggravating the consequences of the earthquake?

**RB:** This is a deeply worrying issue, because since 2006 China has forced tens of thousands of Tibetan nomads to abandon their flocks and their tents, where they would have been completely safe, and in effect their culture, because they were made to move to concrete and brick houses on the edges of towns, especially Yushu, usually with no clear prospect of income apart from some compensation fee. This policy, for which there seems to have been little or no public consultation, was very controversial even among some Chinese scholars and will seem more regrettable now.

However, it’s important to point out that Yushu has an unusually good history of relations with the Chinese authorities in the last few years, because local Tibetans were allowed to start NGOs, local schools, a library, a Medical College and an orphanage, with far less interference than in most Tibetan towns in China. Additionally, the authorities did not encourage migration of non-Tibetans into the area. The benefits of this policy showed in the fact that people decided not to stage major protests in Jyeku during March 2008. Because the Chinese authorities allowed this town to develop a certain measure of cultural identity and authority, there is a legacy of goodwill that might help the situation even in this difficult period.

**Tags:** Le Monde, Qinghai Earthquake, Robert Barnett