

NO LOSAR CAMPAIGN: WHEN TIBETANS REFUSED TO CELEBRATE NEW YEAR

Source: Lhuboom/RFA)

In February 2009, Tibetans in Tibet used the annual celebration of Losar (Tibetan New Year) as a symbolic means of resistance to challenge the Chinese regime. Tibetans across many sectors and regions stood together and used the holiday to mourn the thousands who died or disappeared in China's crackdown of the 2008 Tibetan uprising. Instead of the usual Losar merriment of dancing and parties, Tibetans lit candles and said prayers for the dead and for the living.



Chinese authorities attempted to force Tibetans to celebrate as usual, and in some areas even making it compulsory to celebrate. They used a preemptive crackdown called "Strike Hard," searching houses and making arrests. Officials tried to paint a rosy picture, organizing their own celebratory gala for state-run TV, giving away shopping vouchers and declaring a one-week public holiday with free admission to museums and amusement parks. They needed to convince the world that Tibetans were happy under Chinese rule.

But with the ongoing and brutal crackdown in Tibet, most Tibetans did not participate in the usual Losar celebrations. Despite the government's tactics of intimidation and gifts of money and fireworks to encourage festivities, in 2009, the sound of Losar was a deafening silence. The symbolic power of this widespread protest was undeniable, an important measure of civil resistance across Tibet. As the Tibetan blogger Woesser said, Losar in 2009 represented "a conscious awakening of an entire people."

ISSUE

During and after the 2008 uprising, thousands of Tibetans in Tibet were killed or disappeared by Chinese authorities. For Losar 2009, Tibetans chose to mourn the dead and pray for the living instead of observing the usual celebrations.

WHO

Tibetans inside Tibet and in exile

WHERE

Across the three provinces of Tibet and in exile

GOALS

- To commemorate those who were killed, imprisoned, or disappeared in the 2008 uprising

- To resist Chinese government pressure by building solidarity with each other

STRATEGY

The strategy of the No Losar campaign was to do the opposite of the norm by defying the expectations of the authorities and mourning on an occasion that is normally considered festive. Since the Chinese authorities wanted to portray Tibetans as happy, the Tibetans' strategy was to display their unhappiness to the world and embarrass the authorities.

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The campaign was planned and word was spread through text messages, word of mouth, leaflets, and posters calling for mourning instead of celebration. Bloggers wrote about how and why Tibetans should use Losar for resistance and Tibet Support Groups in exile followed the lead of Tibetans inside Tibet, spreading the message of No Losar.



Source: eleven Shadows.com

ISSUE FRAMING

One text message described the issue framing: "To mourn those Tibetans who died in 2008, those many heroes who gave their lives, to show sympathy for all Tibetans, we should have no New Year and must join hands to show our solidarity."

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

- Tibetans in Tibet from a wide spectrum of communities and backgrounds, including local people, village leaders, monks, and nuns
- Tibetans in exile, including the Tibetan Government in Exile
- Tibet Support Groups, playing a role in spreading the word outside

TARGET

There was no particular target as Tibetans could achieve their goals without a concession from specific power holders.

OPPONENT(S)

Chinese authorities and military forces

TACTICS

- Boycott
- Leafleting/hanging posters
- Vigils and prayer ceremonies
- Wearing old and worn out clothes to signify mourning
- Wearing a sad, long face while performing in the official ceremony

The No Losar protest was dispersed across Tibet and in exile. Authorities applied different levels of repression in different regions of Tibet, so the risk varied. For some village leaders and people handing out leaflets, the risk was high and arrests were made. In some areas, random house-to-house searches were conducted to intimidate Tibetans. Anyone spreading the call to protest could be singled out. To avoid repression, some Tibetans told Chinese authorities they were mourning the dead from the 2008 earthquake, not the 2008 crackdown. In general, the call of No Losar remained the same throughout.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

Chinese authorities issued broadcasts and photos showing Tibetans happily celebrating. Meanwhile, police in certain areas made arrests and tried to force people to sign papers stating there would be no resistance and that they would follow the rules of the Chinese Communist Party. Reports say as many as 20,000 additional soldiers were deployed, and often village leaders were threatened with arrest if they urged people to boycott Losar. The overall response from Chinese authorities was a threat: "Celebrate or else."

MEDIA & MESSAGING

There was mainstream media coverage in outlets such as the LA Times, London Times, and New York Times, helping grow the impact of the protest. The message was clear: "Say No to Losar." It is unclear if they reached out to the media or if the media reached out to them. Tibetans in exile and Tibet Support Groups helped spread the message of No Losar, both in the media and across the internet.

OUTCOMES

The No Losar movement represented a significant shift in tactics, from methods of concentration such as protest demonstrations to methods of dispersion such as non-cooperation. It allowed thousands of Tibetans to participate in the resistance without running a high risk of arrest. Thus, it lowered the threshold for joining the resistance, with Tibetans shifting from high-risk tactics of commission (e.g. protesting) to more dispersed and less risky tactics of omission (e.g. deliberately refusing to carry out a specific act). This creativity set the groundwork for other future noncooperation tactics.