China Aims to Stifle Tibet’s Photocopiers

BEIJING — The authorities have identified a new threat to political stability in the restive region of Tibet: photocopiers. Fearful that Tibetans might mass-copy incendiary material, public security officials intend to more tightly control printing and photocopying shops, according to reports from the Tibetan capital, Lhasa.

A regulation now in the works will require the operators of printing and photocopying shops to obtain a new permit from the government, the Lhasa Evening News reported this month. They will also be required to take down identifying information about their clients and the specific documents printed or copied, the newspaper said.

A public security official in Lhasa, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the regulation “is being implemented right now,” but on a preliminary basis. The official hung up the phone without providing further details.
Tibetan activists said the new controls were part of a broader effort to constrain Tibetan intellectuals after a March 2008 uprising that led to scores of deaths. Since the riots, more than 30 Tibetan writers, artists and other intellectuals have been detained for song lyrics, essays, telephone conversations and e-mail messages deemed to pose a threat to Chinese rule, according to a report issued this week by the International Campaign for Tibet, a human rights group based in Washington.

“Basically, the main purpose is to instill fear into people's hearts,” said Woeser, an activist who, like many Tibetans, goes by one name. “In the past, the authorities tried to control ordinary people at the grass-roots level. But they have gradually changed their target to intellectuals in order to try to control thought.”

Ms. Woeser said she was also a target of the authorities for her views. She lost her job in Lhasa after her book “Notes on Tibet” was banned in 2003. She now lives in Beijing, but she said she was carefully watched by the authorities.

China’s leaders contend that their only goal is to guarantee stability, ethnic unity and better living standards for Tibetans. Officials say that as long as separatist leaders are kept firmly in check, continued economic development will win Tibetans over to Chinese rule.

But the International Campaign for Tibet’s report contends that the authorities are not merely punishing separatists, but also dissidents of all stripes who dare to criticize the government and defend Tibetans’ cultural and religious identity. A 47-year-old writer named Tragyal was arrested in April after he published a book calling on Tibetans to defend their rights through peaceful demonstrations, the report states. His current whereabouts is unknown, it said.

A popular Tibetan singer, Tashi Dhondup, was sentenced to 15 months at a labor camp in January after he released a new CD with a song calling for the return of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, according to the report. He had been arrested on suspicion of “incitement to split the nation,” the report states.

The Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959 after a failed uprising against the Chinese authorities. He says he supports greater autonomy for Tibet but not secession. China says the Dalai Lama’s goal is an independent Tibet.

The authorities in Tibet apparently see printing and photocopying shops as potential channels through which unrest can spread. One Chinese print shop operator in Lhasa, who is of the majority Han ethnicity rather than Tibetan, said that her husband had been summoned to a meeting last week on the new requirements.

“You know sometimes people print documents in the Tibetan language, which we don’t understand,” said the woman, who gave her last name as Wu. “These might be illegal pamphlets.”

Tanzen Lhundup, a research fellow at the government-backed China Tibetology Research Center, which typically follows the government line on Tibet, said in an interview that “the regulation itself is not wrong.” But he said that it should have been put before the public before it was put in place.

“They have never issued such a regulation before,” he said. “On what grounds do they want to issue it? I think citizens should be consulted first.”

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