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In this presentation today I will provide a brief account of current conditions of religious persecution in Tibet. It is impossible, however, to understand religious persecution in Tibet without understanding the political context in which it occurs and the political apparatus that the Chinese government uses to maintain control in Tibet. Religious persecution in Tibet is not just a matter of ethnic or religious conflict or discrimination by a majority against its minorities. Religious persecution in Tibet is politically motivated, and consciously implemented as policy to realize political ends.

Some of you are probably familiar with at least the broad outlines of what happened in Tibet during first two decades after the Chinese communist government and the People's Liberation Army moved into Tibet in 1950 and 1951. In the eastern Tibetan areas -- what Tibetans refer to as Kham and Amdo, which are now incorporated into a number of Chinese provinces -- resistance was brutally suppressed, with large-scale loss of life, and monasteries and nunneries were destroyed. The immediate objective was the implementation of the socialist reforms underway in China. Tibetans in these areas were not exempted from the political campaigns raging throughout China during the 1950s, which included attacks on religion and the destruction of monasteries. Following the 1959 uprising in Lhasa, when the Dalai Lama and some 100,000 Tibetans fled to India, the same policies were implemented in central Tibet. Within a few years, virtually all of Tibet's more than 6,000 monasteries and nunneries were destroyed. Virtually all of the more than 500,000 monks and nuns were driven from the monasteries and nunneries of Tibet; many were tortured, killed, imprisoned, or forced to disrobe. A few years later, during the Cultural Revolution, any display of religion was prohibited, punishable by beatings and imprisonment, and all religious objects were confiscated and destroyed.

I do not want to dwell on this history, but there are certain continuities with the present policy on religion. Though all of this destruction was conceived at the time as part of a socialist agenda to reconstruct Tibet, its aim was to obliterate the distinctive characteristics of Tibetan culture and civilization and absorb Tibet into China. Though Chinese society has itself undergone many changes since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the religion of Tibetans was then, as it is now, still seen as an obstacle to the goal of absorbing Tibet into China.

Religious practice did not reappear again until after 1980. As restrictions were lifted during the 1980's there was a huge resurgence of religion in Tibet. Once it was clear they would not be punished, Tibetans set up altars in their homes, prayed in public, and made pilgrimages to holy places. There was, at the same time, an enormous amount of spontaneous rebuilding of temples and monasteries -- almost entirely supported by people's voluntary labour and resources. Most importantly, monasteries and nunneries filled with young monks and nuns who wished to pursue a religious vocation.