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## **JAPAN: The U.S. Department of State and religious liberty**

### **JAPAN: The Department of State and the drama of religious liberty in Japan**

***The U.S. Department of State is not an NGO***

By Massimo Introvigne

Washington Times (24.05.2023) – The U.S. Department of State’s yearly report on religious liberty is eagerly awaited every

year by scholars and activists who specialize in freedom of religion. It is the most comprehensive document of this kind published internationally. Some sections, including those on China and Russia, are usually outstanding, and this is also true for the 2023 report, covering developments in the year 2022.

I noticed, however, that the 2023 document is unusually “soft” on some countries where there have been serious issues of religious liberty. One such case is in Japan. In 2022, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was assassinated by a man who stated he wanted to punish him for his friendly attitude to the Unification Church, now called Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.

The assassin claimed that in 2002 his mother, who is still a member of the Family Federation, went bankrupt from excessive donations to the religious movement. An unprecedented slander campaign against the Family Federation followed, which extended to other groups stigmatized in Japan, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Regulations were passed limiting religious movements’ freedom to collect donations and socialize the children of their members into their religions. Administrative proceedings were started that may lead the government to seek the de-registration of the Family Federation as a religious organization. Similar proceedings are threatened against the Jehovah’s Witnesses. It would be no exaggeration to say that what is happening in Japan is now the most dramatic religious liberty crisis in a democratic country.

The report by the Department of State mentions that "Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, (CAP-Freedom of Conscience), a Paris-based NGO, submitted a series of statements to the UN Human Rights Committee that said that the Unification Church had become a victim of 'a campaign of intolerance, discrimination, and persecution' in Japan since Abe's assassination. The church stated its members suffered attacks, assaults, and death threats as a result of negative media attention." The report also mentions concerns about the new regulations.

However, it gives equal coverage to the false anti-religious position that the attack against the Family Federation and the Jehovah's Witnesses "was not about religious freedom" but about an alleged "harm" caused to members and society. It also says the public testimonies of certain disgruntled ex-members of the stigmatized groups, ignoring that the story of the most visible of them, ex-Family-Federation devotee Sayuri Ogawa (a pseudonym), has been debunked as largely false by an independent and award-winning Japanese journalist, Masumi Fukuda. [The Unification Church's affiliated commercial empire comprises hundreds of ventures in more than a half-dozen countries, including hospitals, universities and newspapers, including The Washington Times.]

I do not believe that positions favorable and hostile to religious liberty should be given "equal coverage" in a report about freedom of religion. I would have preferred a coverage of the Japanese situation confirming the traditional American position that regards stigmatization of certain groups as "cults" as bigotry, a position reiterated on the sections on Russia and China of the same 2023 report. And I know for a fact that American ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, Rashad Hussain, had been fully briefed

about what is happening in Japan.

I realize that the world has changed, and the name of this change is the war in Ukraine. The U.S. Department of State is not an NGO. It is about politics. It is understandable that, even when it comes to religious liberty, the distinction between countries perceived as enemies or competitors, such as Russia and China, and those that are allies of the United States and support Ukraine has been taken into account, with an effort not to irritate governments regarded as valuable partners, including Japan. Yet, the situation in Japan is so dramatic that a more thorough criticism would have been more consistent with the traditional American uncompromising stand for religious liberty.

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