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Japan's threat to international religious freedom

By Aaron Rhodes

[The Messenger Opinion](#) (15.07.2023) - Japan has a well-earned reputation as a defender of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, known and admired for its lively, open politics and tolerance for dissent. But if the current government goes through with its threat to [dissolve](#) a minority religious group, it will not only deny religious freedom at home but show that liberal democracies may not be serious about defending principles they promote.

The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, better known as the Unification Church, has been [under scrutiny](#) by Japanese media, political parties and government bodies since Japan's former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, was assassinated a year ago, on July 8, 2022. Tetsuya Yamagami, the man accused of shooting Abe with a homemade gun, reportedly held him [responsible](#) for the fact that Yamagami's mother had given a substantial amount of money to the Unification Church.

Abe was not a member of the church but had taken part by video in a meeting organized by an international NGO, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF), founded by church leaders. Over the years, hundreds of others, including many national and international figures, have done the same thing.

The facts surrounding this tragedy have been [documented](#) by sociologist Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an expert on new religious movements. [Prejudice](#) against "cults" may have played a role. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, opponents of the church began a campaign in the media and on the internet, and some church members reportedly received [death threats](#).

Leading this campaign was Japan's Communist Party, exploiting the fact that several other members of Abe's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) also had had contacts with the UPF. The Unification Church, founded by the late Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who was jailed and tortured by the North Korean communist regime, has been fiercely anti-communist and socially conservative.

Other leading figures in the campaign against the church include lawyers who have denounced its fundraising practices and "de-programmers" who have earned money by persuading Unification Church followers to abandon the church. The "scandal" of political figures having had even tenuous connections with the church, and the danger of "cults" to Japanese society — including, to some, the [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) — has been the main interest of mainstream Japanese media following Abe's death. Some in the media and in the political class have laid blame on the church for his assassination.

Commentary from outside Japan has not been helpful. As Introvigne [found](#), the U.S. government's report on international religious freedom "gives equal coverage to the typical anti-cult position that the attack against the [Unification Church] and the

Jehovah's Witnesses 'was not about religious freedom' but about 'harm' caused to members and society." The report, he concluded, showed the U.S. being "soft" on an ally.

Japan just earned a score of 96/100 for its respect for political rights and civil liberties from Freedom House, but that independent body [sidestepped](#) the government's threat to religious freedom in its report.

This suggests that should the Japanese government act on the proposal to dissolve the church, reaction by the United States — Japan's strongest ally and the champion of religious freedom around the world — and by the human rights community may be tepid. That would present a problem for religious minorities in Japan and potentially for others around the world.

Religious freedom is threatened by aggressive secularism in the developed Western world, but more acutely by rising authoritarianism and totalitarianism in China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and elsewhere.

If Japan, a supporter of the United Nations and international norms, dissolves a legally constituted religious group, undeterred by international human rights institutions and liberal democracies, authoritarian states may see a green light for further assaults on Christians, Muslims, minorities such as the Ahmadi Muslims, Jews, the Baha'i and others. And if any Western state raises alarm about such abuses, the abusers could point to Japan's overlooked violations and call them hypocritical.

With so much at stake, human rights monitors and friends of Japan should help ensure that the principle of religious freedom is not corroded.

Aaron Rhodes is senior fellow in the Common Sense Society, whose council of trustees is chaired by Thomas Peterffy, an investor in *The Messenger*. Rhodes is also president of the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe and was executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights from 1993-2007. He is the author of "The Debasement of Human Rights."

Photo: Mourners hold a candlelight vigil to pay tribute to Japan's late former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, who was fatally shot during a campaign speech on July 8, 2022. Sam Panthaky/AFP via Getty Images

The Department of State and the drama of religious liberty in Japan

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



Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks during a news conference at the State Department, Wednesday, Jan. 11, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

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.

Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist, is the former Representative of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) for combating racism, xenophobia, and intolerance against Christians and members of other religions, and the editor-in-chief of the daily magazine on religious liberty "Bitter Winter."
