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## **Fragile balance of press freedom and religious liberty - Harmful impact of stigmatizing language**

**Published on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2025**

*By Peter Zoehrer\*, Executive Director, FOREF Europe*

[FOREF \(03.05.2025\)](#) - On World Press Freedom Day, we celebrate journalism's role in holding power to account and amplifying the voices of the vulnerable. **Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) enshrines freedom of expression as a pillar of democracy. But this freedom is not without consequence. When media outlets stigmatize religious minorities, they don't just shape narratives—they shape realities.**

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, is not in tension with press freedom—it is bound to it. When one is compromised, both suffer.

Across democratic societies, peaceful faith communities are increasingly targeted not by the state alone, but by a media culture that recycles old prejudices in new packaging. Labels like "sect" or "cult"—lacking legal or academic definition—are used to delegitimize entire belief systems. These terms carry historical weight and modern danger: they incite fear, provoke hostility, and open the door to discrimination, violence, and even legal erasure.

### ***Austria: When a Broadcaster Crosses the Line***

One recent example in Austria reveals how public broadcasting can blur the line between journalism and defamation. In a 2-minute-13-second report, *ORF Mittagsjournal*—Austria's national broadcaster—used the word "Sekte" (cult) twelve times to describe the **Unification Church**, a legally recognized faith community under Austrian law with no record of misconduct. Its members contribute to society through peacebuilding, education, and interfaith dialogue.

ORF justified its language by citing a Japanese court ruling dissolving a related group over alleged civil violations. But it omitted critical facts: that the Church is protected under Austrian law; that no wrongdoing has been reported locally; and that the Japanese decision has been condemned by leading international human rights advocates. Among them are participants of the IRF Roundtable, Human Rights Without Frontiers, and

speakers at the IRF Summit 2025, all of whom see the ruling as a violation of international FoRB standards.

Austria's 1998 Recognition Act guarantees equal protection to recognized religious communities. By ignoring this and repeating stigmatizing language, ORF helped legitimize prejudice. A Church spokesperson formally requested a correction—none was issued. Such reporting doesn't just misinform; it emboldens hate. In neighboring Germany, neo-Nazi extremists recently attacked Hare Krishna devotees—violence fueled by decades of media framing minority faiths as dangerous "sects."

### ***A European Pattern***

Austria is not alone. In Germany, state and media actors have long labeled groups like Scientology and Hare Krishna as "anti-democratic" without judicial basis. These designations have led to surveillance, job loss, and social ostracism.

In France, the discredited 1995 Parliamentary Report on Sects listed 172 groups—from Christian Scientists to Antoinists—as threats to public order, despite no criminal evidence. Today, MIVILUDES, the state's anti-cult task force, continues to issue alerts that the media repeat without question, shaping both public sentiment and policy.

These terms have no legal precision—yet they carry devastating weight. Despite multiple rulings by the European Court of Human Rights affirming the rights of minority religions, stigmatizing labels remain embedded in public discourse.

### ***When Media Enables Persecution***

The consequences of biased media narratives are global. In Myanmar, anti-Muslim rhetoric helped lay the groundwork for the Rohingya genocide. In Pakistan, media-fueled accusations of heresy against Ahmadi Muslims often end in mob violence. In Russia, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned as "extremists" following years of state-sponsored vilification.

In China, Falun Gong practitioners are depicted in state media as part of an "evil cult," a label used to justify mass incarceration, torture, and organ harvesting—documented by international human rights bodies. In India, nationalist outlets inflame religious tensions, targeting Christians and Muslims. The 2022 U.S. State Department Report warns that media bias plays a growing role in triggering violence.

### ***The Silent Crisis: Christians in Africa***

One of the world's most underreported human rights emergencies is the persecution of **Christians in Nigeria**. Thousands have been killed by extremist groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and radicalized Fulani militias. Churches have been razed, communities massacred, and survivors silenced. Despite this, global media coverage is sparse, and the religious motive is often downplayed or ignored. This silence perpetuates impunity and signals to persecutors that the world is not watching. In regions where state protection is weak or complicit, the media's failure to report the truth enables suffering to continue unchecked.

### ***Japan: The Weaponization of Unpopularity***

In Japan, the consequences of media-led vilification have reached alarming proportions. After the 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the **Unification**

**Church** was scapegoated in over 4,000 articles branding it a “cult”—despite no link to the crime. The assassin acted alone, driven by personal grievance unrelated to Church leadership or doctrine.

Nevertheless, under political and media pressure, the government launched legal proceedings that led to a **dissolution order** by the Tokyo District Court on March 25, 2025. The Church has appealed, but the social damage is already evident: children bullied in schools, businesses severing ties, banks refusing service. If the appeal fails, the state will confiscate all assets and force the closure of churches and institutions—effectively erasing a legally registered faith group without a criminal conviction.

This action has drawn global condemnation. Former U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, former U.S. Speaker Newt Gingrich, and USCIRF Co-Chair Katrina Lantos-Swett have all called it a threat to democracy. European FoRB experts warn that Japan is setting a dangerous precedent: that **unpopularity amplified by a hostile press** can now justify the dissolution of a religious group.

### ***A Digital Age of Echo Chambers—and Resistance***

In our hyper-connected world, disinformation spreads fast—and stigma spreads faster. In Bangladesh, a false social media post about a Quran desecration during Durga Puja in 2021 triggered deadly riots. The line between rumor and journalism collapses quickly.

Yet resistance is growing. Platforms like *Bitter Winter*, FOREF Europe, CESNUR, and independent scholars continue to challenge false narratives, document abuse, and defend conscience.

Courts are taking note. In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in *Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses of Romania v. Romania* that derogatory language by public authorities—when echoed by the media—can violate religious freedom under Article 9 of the ECHR.

### ***Recommendations***

**To safeguard both freedom of the press and freedom of religion or belief, the following actions are urgently needed:**

1. **Eliminate stigmatizing language** such as “cult” or “sect,” unless supported by objective, legal evidence. Just as society has largely removed racial slurs like the “N-word” from responsible discourse, we must also reject religious slurs that dehumanize entire communities. Use accurate, neutral terms such as “**faith community**” or “**new religious movement.**”
2. **Provide training for journalists** on FoRB principles, religious literacy, and cultural sensitivity to prevent the spread of harmful stereotypes.
3. **Ensure media accountability** through ombudspersons, independent press councils, and public responses to unbalanced or defamatory content.
4. **Support independent journalism and watchdog organizations** that uphold both press freedom and the rights of religious minorities.
5. **Urge governments and international bodies** to refrain from adopting or promoting anti-cult narratives that violate international human rights norms.

As **UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Nazila Ghanea** warned in 2023, "**direct violence against marginalized religious communities often goes hand in hand with legally mandated discrimination**"—much of it fueled by biased media.

### **Conclusion: A Test of Integrity**

**World Press Freedom Day** is more than a tribute—it is a test. Will the press stand with the voiceless, or with the mob? Will it defend Articles 18 and 19 of the UDHR—or betray them in pursuit of sensationalism and scapegoats?

In this fragile global moment, integrity matters more than ever. We must demand a journalism rooted in truth, not tribalism; in context, not caricature. Only then can freedom of expression and freedom of belief coexist—not in conflict, but in common cause for justice.

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## **USCIRF releases 2025 annual report about religious freedom in the world**

[USCIRF](#) (28.03.2025) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released its [2025 Annual Report](#). The report documents religious freedom conditions in 2024 and recommends policy to the White House, Congress, and State Department to advance freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) abroad. Congress mandated USCIRF's Annual Report in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998.

*"As repressive governments and violent entities attack and drastically erode freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF's independent reporting and bipartisan recommendations have never been more critical to U.S. foreign policy,"* said USCIRF Chair [Stephen Schneck](#). *"The U.S. government must continue to stand firm against these threats to the universal right of religious freedom."*

*"Despite the escalating threats to freedom of religion or belief, there is real opportunity to stave off any retreat of this fundamental freedom and, if pursued with energy and determination, to advance it,"* said USCIRF Vice Chair [Meir Soloveichik](#). *"Religious freedom is a clear priority of the United States. USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report points the way forward for policy that advances religious freedom in a fast-changing world."*

Highlights from the 2025 Annual Report include:

- Sixteen countries recommended to the Secretary of State for designation as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for particularly severe FoRB violations under IRFA.
- Twelve countries recommended to the Secretary of State for Special Watch List (SWL) designation for severe FoRB violations under IRFA.
- Seven entities recommended for designation as Entities of Particular Concern (EPC).
- Broad policy recommendations to the Legislative and Executive Branches.
- Overview of escalating FoRB challenges in 28 countries, dangers posed by violent entities, and global threats.
- Review of FoRB policy implemented by the U.S. government.

The annual report, including all recommendations, can be accessed at [USCIRF.gov](https://uscirf.gov). Commissioners are available for interviews with the press. To schedule an interview, contact [media@uscirf.gov](mailto:media@uscirf.gov).