

FFWPU UK: Religious Freedom Challenges For FFWPU In Japan

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Religious Freedom Challenges In Japan

Panelists discuss Japanese government persecution of the Family Federation after Shinzo Abe's assassination at an International Religious Freedom conference in Washington, America.

Overview

At a lunch event sponsored by The Universal Peace Federation and The Washington Times Foundation during the recent International Religious Freedom (IRF) conference in Washington D.C., a panel of speakers discussed persecution by the Japanese government against the Family Federation and Women's Federation for Peace after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

The event opened with a pre-recorded video by Newt Gingrich, calling the persecution shocking and surprising given Japan's tradition of honouring religious liberty. Gingrich explained that the government is seeking to fully dissolve the Family Federation without justification.

He went on to say that this effort was instigated by the biased Japanese Communist Party, whose position conflicts with the federations'. He warned that Japan's actions represent an alarming threat to religious freedom, given its importance as a key US ally and bulwark of liberty in the Far East.

After the video, the attention turned to a panel discussion of experts on International Religious Freedom.

Panel Comments

The moderator, Washington Times Opinion editor Charlie Hurt, stressed that no right is more important than religious freedom, which protects our soul and anchors all other rights. He then passed the mic to the panelists to offer brief comments on the issue.

"No right is more important than religious liberty - the right that protects our soul."

W. Cole Durham, Jr., President of the G20 Interfaith Forum, discussed Japan's obligations under international religious freedom declarations to allow communal manifestations of belief through legal entity status for religious groups. He argued that wrongful individual conduct should be punished, not entire communities. (See below for a full copy of his remarks.)

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, IRF Co-Chair, bluntly stated that Japan, as a friend of religious freedom, is currently "driving drunk" on this issue through its persecution. Friends must intervene when friends are

acting dangerously irrational.

Jan Figel, first EU Commissioner on IRF, drew on his experience living under communism to argue that Japan's behavior manifests a well-known pattern of authorities abusing power and lying to dominate religious groups. He said Japan's actions could embolden communist regimes globally, underscoring the need for democratic countries to defend freedom of conscience.

Amb. Suzan Johnson Cook, former IRF Ambassador-At-Large, appealed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as basis for all countries to stand up for their friends when religious freedom is under threat. Bringing governmental attention can help protect against rights violations.

Dr. Massimo Introvigne, Editor at Bitter Winter Magazine, argued the stakes are higher than tax exemption - dissolution would completely destroy the federations, preventing all exercise of religious freedom. He warned Japan's actions could have global implications across dozens of countries if allowed, given cross-border connections on religious issues.

"You do not have any freedom if your soul is not free."

In conclusion, the panel underscored that religious freedom represents the most fundamental right, undergirding all freedoms. Without liberty of conscience, no meaningful freedom exists. They called for global solidarity to defend religious groups from governmental overreach in Japan.

W. Cole Durham, Jr.'s Comments

Over the past thirty years, working in academic settings but also in international law and national legal contexts, I have been actively involved in affirming the right to legal entity status as a core practical feature of freedom of religion and belief. The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief is anchored in the central pillars of international human rights law. The right to that freedom in the internal forum is absolutely protected, but the right to manifest and exercise religion or belief can be limited, but only on carefully restricted conditions, including compliance with the rule of law, non-discrimination, and assurance that any limitations are strictly proportional and necessary. We tend to think of freedom of religion or belief as a matter of individual rights, which it surely is. But by its nature, religion almost always has a communal dimension. Individual belief would be largely empty if deprived of its communal roots and of the ability of religious communities to give content, structure, and a protective home to individual belief.

Religious communities and structures antedate history. States as we now know them arise in contexts which are antedated by prior religious communities and religious commitments. The specific structures of religion and state relationships are heavily dependent on history, but it is now well settled as a matter of international law that freedom of religion or belief necessarily entails the right of religious communities to autonomy in their own affairs. All major legal sources recognise that "the autonomous existence of religious or belief communities is indispensable for pluralism in a democratic society. In modern legal settings, this includes the right to legal entity status. In legal systems that grant benefits such as tax exempt status, refusal to grant the requisite status and comparable benefits constitutes impermissible religious discrimination. This is true in matters of taxation as in other areas. In modern societies, it is not practical to function - to enter into contracts, to employ people, to secure land use rights, to raise and administer funds - without a flexible legal entity that facilitates the work and mission of the religious community.

If there is wrongful conduct, the individual perpetrators should be sanctioned, but an entire religious community should not be shut down or crippled - denying the benefits of the religion to all its believers - because of individual malfeasance, especially where the community itself takes affirmative and effective steps to cure any perceived problems.

In short, dissolution of the Family Federation by the Japanese government would constitute a blatant deprivation of the rights of that religious community.