

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan Copying Totalitarian Regimes

Knut Holdhus
September 30, 2023



Katrina Lantos Swett



Suzan Johnson Cook

USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett in Oslo 8th Nov. 2014

Religious freedom authorities warn Kishida not to follow path of totalitarian regimes



The independent, non-partisan media company RealClearPolitics published 26th September 2023 a commentary headlined "Democracies in Asia Risk Failing on Religious Freedom". It was penned by two religious freedom authorities - Suzan Johnson

Cook, who served as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom from 2011 to 2013, and Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

The two point out that the oppression has become so extreme that we no longer are shocked by the horrible treatment of religious minorities in totalitarian regimes like China, Iran, and Myanmar. What is even more disturbing is however the growing acceptance of persecution in democratic countries.



Students and teachers at Ahmadiyya institute in Bangladesh in 2011

In the article, they warn that some democracies in Asia, such as India, Pakistan, and Japan, are failing to protect religious freedom and are allowing or even encouraging discrimination and persecution of minority faith groups.

Johnson Cook and Swett describe how the Indian government has supported "policies that discriminate against and hinder the freedom of religious minorities, such as Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindu Dalit communities." Those policies have caused violent mob attacks against minority religions.

Also in neighbouring Pakistan you find state-supported persecution leading to mob attacks against minority faiths like Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

What is more surprising to the two former U.S. state officials, is the situation in Japan, a country that in many ways for a long time has been an exemplary democratic nation where the population are guaranteed civil and political rights. The writers explain,

"In a move that is much more reminiscent of current practices in China and Russia, Japan's government is now threatening to dissolve a legally constituted religious group for seemingly political reasons.

Scholars of religion and human rights have watched with concern the developments in Japan following the tragic assassination in 2022 of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The assassin claimed the attack was motivated by his anger at the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), to which his mother belongs and which had ties, through politics, to Abe."



Toru Goto, member of the [Family Federation](#) in Japan, who got his life destroyed by criminal persecutors who held him captive for more than 12 years in order to break his faith. Photo (2022)

The commentary in RealClearPolitics compares the development in Japan since the Abe assassination to the situation in totalitarian states, where religious minorities have been eliminated after campaigns where the authorities used the media to paint a black picture of particular faith groups.

Although the Kishida administration did not orchestrate such a campaign, they seem to have joined it and come to accept its claims and goals.

Johnson Cook and Swett write,

"Dissolving a religious organization that has not been found guilty of any crime would taint the image of Japan as a country committed to democratic principles. Democracies must live by their values and can never follow the path of totalitarian regimes [...]."

The two American religious freedom advocates emphasize the vital role of freedom of religion or belief for protecting faiths that are often misunderstood and portrayed in a negative manner. Every democracy has the duty to guard the rights of minorities to practice their faith, whether it be the Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan, Christians in India or a relatively new religious movement like the [Family](#)

[Federation](#) in Japan.

Swett and Johnson Cook point out,

"Governments that truly embrace freedom of religion or belief safeguard their religious communities against the tides of negative public opinion and against prejudice. Laws, policies, or actions that disregard or trample on this fundamental right have no place in democratic nations."



Rashad Hussain 15th May 2023

U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain is encouraged by Johnson Cook and Swett to "speak out boldly" to stop the ongoing attacks on freedom of religion and belief in democratic nations. If such an essential human right is disregarded there, dictators around the world have the perfect excuse to do the same. The world's democracies must stand up for freedom religion and belief.

"Japan Copying Totalitarian Regimes" - text: Knut Holdhus

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September 12, 2023 • Knut Holdhus

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Changing the Law: Spotlight on Judicial Decisions Concerning Japanese Government's Right to Ask Questions

By editorial department of Sekai Nippo

12th September 2023 – Published as an editorial in the Japanese newspaper Sekai Nippo. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. [Original article](#)

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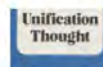
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The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has decided to impose administrative penalties on the grounds that the **Family Federation for World Peace and Unification** (Family Federation) did not answer questions based on the "Report and Questions" of the Religious Corporations Law, and decided to proceed to the Tokyo District Court.

The **Family Federation** issued a statement claiming that it "sincerely responded to questions from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) every time while protecting the privacy and religious freedom of believers."



The Sekai Nippo logo

Due to partial non-response

This is the first time that the right to question a religious corporation has been exercised, and if a religious corporation refuses to answer or gives a false answer when asked a question, a fine of up to 100,000 yen may be imposed on the representative officer of the religious corporation. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) said that it had asked the **Family Federation** 500 questions, and the reason for the fine was that it did not answer about 100 items.



Symbol of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan. Photo: 文部科学省(MEXT Japan) / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#)

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It is believed that the **faith society** answered about 80% of the questions,

but the specifics of the questions, the content of the answers, and the details of the contents that were not answered, have not been made public. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has exercised the "right to report and ask questions" seven times, but it is safe to assume that the decision to ask for a fine was intended to accumulate evidence for the dissolution order from the beginning, contrary to the initial "prudent judgment".

Originally, it cannot be said that the exercise of the right to question the **Family Federation** was carried out in a calm discussion. After the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last July due to a grudge against the **faith society**, criticism of troubles surrounding the **faith society** swept the media. Furthermore, with regard to election campaigns and religious votes, the opposition parties raised the issue of "points of contact" with the LDP.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida declared a break with religious groups, and the Diet passed the Act on Prevention of Unreasonable Solicitation of Donations (Victim Relief Law) as a measure to deal with donation troubles. In addition, regarding the legal interpretation of "violation of laws and regulations" – a requirement for requesting a dissolution order for a religious corporation, as a "criminal penalty", based on a Supreme Court judgment – the prime minister replied to the Diet that civil law torts also belong to this category. The prime minister changed the legal interpretation overnight.

Prior to this change in interpretation, the Religious Affairs Division of the Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) replied that the **Family Federation** was "not subject to a request for a dissolution order", but later exercised its right to



Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan

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later exercised its right to question the [Family Federation](#) in an attempt to bring the request for a dissolution order. Overseas human rights groups and religious officials are concerned that this move could lead to serious religious persecution.

Logo of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. [Public domain image](#)

In response to some media outlets reporting on the “penal fine policy” of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the [religious group](#) issued a statement stating that “if a court case over the fine against the corporation is pending in the future, the corporation will do everything it can to contest the legality of the exercise itself of the right to question.” Criticism and debate are natural as former believers and family members have come forward to complain of damage, but the religious freedom and privacy of believers who continue to practice the faith should also be considered.

Relationship with religion questioned

The hurdle to exercising the right to question was lowered to “civil,” and political power over religion was expanded. It will be necessary to pay close attention to how the right to question religious corporations will be exercised for the first time, and how the court proceedings will unfold over the fines required by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, in order to determine how the basic human rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the administrative power should be protected.

Featured image above to illustrate “Government Changing the Law Overnight”: Fumio Kishida 5th October 2021. Photo: [首相官邸 / Wikimedia Commons](#). License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int](#)

“Government Changing the Law Overnight” – text: Editorial Department of the [Sekai Nippo](#), Tokyo, Japan.

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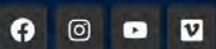
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