

## FFWPU Europe and Middle East: Will Japan's Contempt for Religious Freedom Sour Relations with USA

Knut Holdhus  
December 18, 2024



*Senator Ted Cruz (Rep) meeting Jimmy Lai (left) and another pro-democracy dissident in Hong Kong Oct. 12, 2019. Cruz writes, "While I was in Hong Kong, I met Jimmy Lai and other pro-democracy dissidents. Reports of his arrest are deeply troubling. Instead of focusing on the #coronavirus, the HK government and Communist Chinese Party are exploiting this crisis to attack political opponents."*



### Question raised in Tokyo: Could Freedom of Religion Strain U.S.-Japan Relations?

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#### Series: Freedom of Religion Under Threat - Part 7: Religion in Japan in a Global Context

#### U.S.A. to Take Firm Action Against Religious Persecution

by the Religious Freedom Investigative Team of the editorial department of [Sekai Nippo](#)

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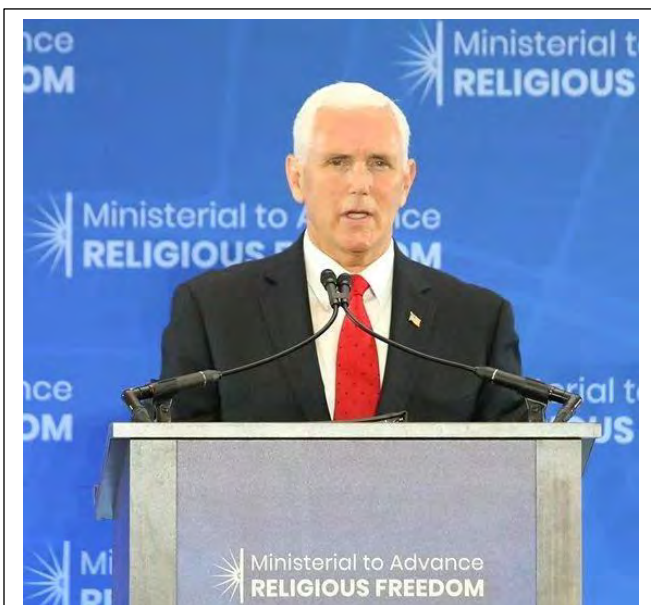
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The founder of Hong Kong's daily newspaper Apple Daily, Jimmy Lai (76), is at the center of an issue that could ignite U.S.-China tensions. The upcoming Trump administration is expected to adopt a hardline stance on China, focusing not only on trade and security but also on human rights.



*Jimmy Lai with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence in the White House, July 8, 2019. A third person, presumably an interpreter, is sitting in the foreground with the back of his head to the camera. Photo from Tweet by Pence on August 10, 2020*

Jimmy Lai, a prominent pro-democracy figure in Hong Kong, continuously criticized the Chinese Communist Party through his newspaper's reporting. In 2020, he was arrested on charges of violating the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) and has been detained for over four years. In his ongoing trial, he now faces the possibility of a life sentence.



*U.S. Vice President Mike Pence addresses delegates at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State in Washington D.C. on July 18, 2019*

In October, during an interview on a conservative U.S. podcast, incoming U.S. President Trump was asked whether he could secure Lai's release if elected. Trump firmly responded, "100% yes. It's very simple." In response, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, John Lee Ka-chiu, warned, "Mutual respect is important. Local internal affairs should not be interfered with." This issue is already emerging as a point of contention between the U.S. and China.

The U.S. conservative camp strongly advocates for Lai's release because they see his imprisonment as a symbol of oppression against the pro-democracy movement. However, there's another dimension: Lai is also a devout Catholic, and many interpret his arrest as "religious persecution".

Lai, who holds British citizenship, could have fled overseas before his arrest. However, he was encouraged by his wife - also a Catholic -

who told him, "You must carry your own cross." Therefore, Lai chose to remain and face imprisonment.

Reports of Jimmy Lai's faith, his deep bond with his wife, and even his efforts to draw images of Christ using the small amounts of paper and pencils available to him in prison have resonated deeply with the U.S. public. For the incoming Trump administration, abandoning a Christian who endures China's

oppression through his faith is not an option.



*Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback delivers opening remarks at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom held at the U.S. Department of State in Washington D.C. on July 16-18, 2019*

For the United States, defending human rights is a universal theme of its diplomacy, but the values reflected in such efforts differ depending on the administration. The Democratic administrations of Obama and Biden prioritized the expansion of LGBT rights, whereas the upcoming Trump administration is expected to place the defense of religious freedom at the core of its human rights diplomacy.

One major reason for this is the strong demand from Trump's key support base, the evangelical Christians. During his first administration, Trump held the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom conference twice, bringing together individuals from around the world who face religious persecution.

It remains highly doubtful whether the Japanese government can align itself with the Trump administration's human rights diplomacy, which

prioritizes religious freedom. Criticism of the Japanese government has already surfaced from influential figures close to Trump, particularly in light of Japan's request to dissolve the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)).

On 8th December, Paula White, Trump's "spiritual advisor", sent a [video message](#) to a [rally in Tokyo](#) organized by the Japanese Committee of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom (ICRF). In her message, she noted that concerns have been expressed by the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, and UN-affiliated NGOs, stating, "We urge our great ally in Japan to uphold religious freedom for all."

Additionally, Sam Brownback, who served as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom under Trump's first administration, commented in a February interview with [this newspaper](#):

"The [Unification Church](#) has fought against communism for decades. China opposes anti-communist groups like the [Unification Church](#). If the Trump administration returns to power, it will actively address this issue."

Brownback projected that the next U.S. administration would view Japan's request to dissolve the [church](#) as "a major concern".

The issue of religious freedom is thus poised to become not only a flashpoint in U.S.-China relations but also a growing thorn in Japan-U.S. relations.

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# Intersection Of Politics And Religion In USA

• December 16, 2024 • Knut Holdhus



*Tokyo paper takes a look at a USA where politics and religion intersect and compares it to the vastly different scenario unfolding in Japan with its LDP-supported anti-religious measures*

Tokyo, 10th December 2024 – Published as the **47th article** in a series in the Japanese newspaper *Sekai Nippo*. Republished with permission. Translated from Japanese. *Original article*

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President Donald J. Trump participates in a prayer with African American Leaders and Pastor Paula White Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020, in the Cabinet Room of the White House. Official White House Photo by Tia Dufour. [Public domain image](#). Cropped

In late October 2024, just days before the U.S. presidential election, a gathering in the Atlanta suburbs of the key battleground state of Georgia attracted over 1,000 Christian pastors supporting Republican candidate and former President Donald Trump.

During a discussion with Pastor Paula White, Trump's "spiritual advisor", he addressed the assembled pastors, calling them "the most important people" and declaring:

"This will connect you directly with the Oval Office – directly with me."

During his first term, Trump established a "Faith Office" at the White House as a liaison with religious leaders. He promised to reinstate this office to provide direct access to the president.

At the end of the gathering, over ten pastors surrounded Trump on stage to pray. Among them, Pastor Jack Graham, leader of a megachurch in Texas, prayed:

"We thank you for raising up Trump as a warrior for Your word and wisdom. As You make him our president once again, we pray You grant him strength, wisdom, and joy."



Dr. Jack Graham, Senior Pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church, Plano, Texas. Photo: Prestonwood Baptist Church / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

#### What if this happened in Japan?

If similar interactions between politicians and religious leaders were observed in Japan, it would undoubtedly provoke fierce criticism as a "collusive relationship". While leftist forces in the U.S. do criticize the significant influence of Christian conservatives on American politics, there is almost no widespread discourse labeling close ties between politicians and religious organizations as inherently inappropriate.

Trump's close relationship with Christianity is evidenced by countless examples. For instance, he categorically rejected transgender ideology from a religious perspective, asserting,

"God created two genders, male and female."

His bold stance against extreme LGBT policies, undeterred by leftist backlash, helped him gain broader support among Christians.

## Trump's choice for running mate and religious appeals



Senator Vance official portrait. 118th Congress, 26th Jan. 2023. Photo: US Congress. [Public domain image](#)

Senator J.D. Vance, whom Trump selected as his running mate, is a devout Catholic. During an October campaign rally, when someone in the crowd shouted, "Jesus is King," Vance responded, "That's right. Jesus is King," earning thunderous applause. His comment was also a jab at Democratic candidate Vice President Kamala Harris, who, days earlier, had dismissed a Christian student declaring, "Jesus is Lord," by saying, "You're at the wrong rally."

According to an NBC News exit poll from the presidential election, 82% of conservative white evangelical Christians, who made up 23% of voters, cast their ballots for Trump. Additionally, 63% of

Catholic voters supported him. There's no doubt that consolidating Christian support was a major factor in Trump's overwhelming success.

### Harris' reliance on the "religious vote"

Harris, too, sought to harness the "religious vote". She actively visited Black churches, which have historically been a cornerstone of Democratic electoral support, especially within the devoutly Christian black community.

In late October, Harris attended a worship service at a black church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a key battleground state. She shared her childhood experiences of attending church and emphasized how those experiences helped her "fully understand the teachings of the Bible and the power of faith." Naturally, no one derided her actions as "too close" to religion.



Vice President Kamala Harris takes her official portrait Thursday, March 4, 2021, in the South Court Auditorium in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building at the White House. Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson. [Public domain image](#). Cropped

### Contrasting Japan's religious and political landscape

In contrast, Japan's reaction to the intersection of religion and politics is starkly different. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, public attention turned to the ties between the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)). This led to widespread condemnation, and the LDP announced a complete severance of ties with the [organization](#). The backlash created a social climate in which any religious involvement in politics seemed taboo, as though religion must have no place in political matters whatsoever.

This perspective is far removed from the norms in the United States.

**Featured image** above: President Donald J. Trump joins members of his Cabinet in a prayer led by Secretary of Energy Rick Perry during a Cabinet Meeting Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2019, in the Cabinet Room of the White House. Official White House Photo by Joyce N. Boghosian. [Public domain image](#)

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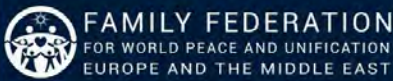
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