

## FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan - Threat To Religious Freedom

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Current threat to religious freedom in Japan may have global consequences



Aaron Rhodes, human rights expert and author, warns in a [commentary](#) in the Washington DC based news website The Messenger 15th July, 2023, about the present threat to religious freedom in Japan since the Abe assassination one year ago. Much is at stake for religious liberty in Japan and globally because of what he describes as a campaign led by Japan's Communist Party against a minority religion.

Normally, we see such attacks in communist and totalitarian states. Although Japan is a free nation, it has one of the largest communist parties in the democratic world.

Rhodes is a long-time campaigner for human rights and religious freedom and served from 1993 to 2007 as executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. In the article headlined "[Japan's Threat to International Religious Freedom](#)", he points out the dangers posed to believers not just in the land of the rising sun, but all around the world, if the communists in Japan were to succeed in their decades long war against the [Family Federation](#), formerly the [Unification Church](#).



Shinzo Abe March 2022

The communists, aided by leftwing activist lawyers, exploited politically the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe 8th July 2022. In a well-orchestrated campaign, they succeeded, as Rhodes points out, in telling the story that the [Family Federation](#) is to be blamed for the terror attack on Abe.

It is quite amazing how the media took this story at face value and focused on Japanese lawmakers' connection to the [Unification Church](#), especially within the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in spite of such connections often being slight.

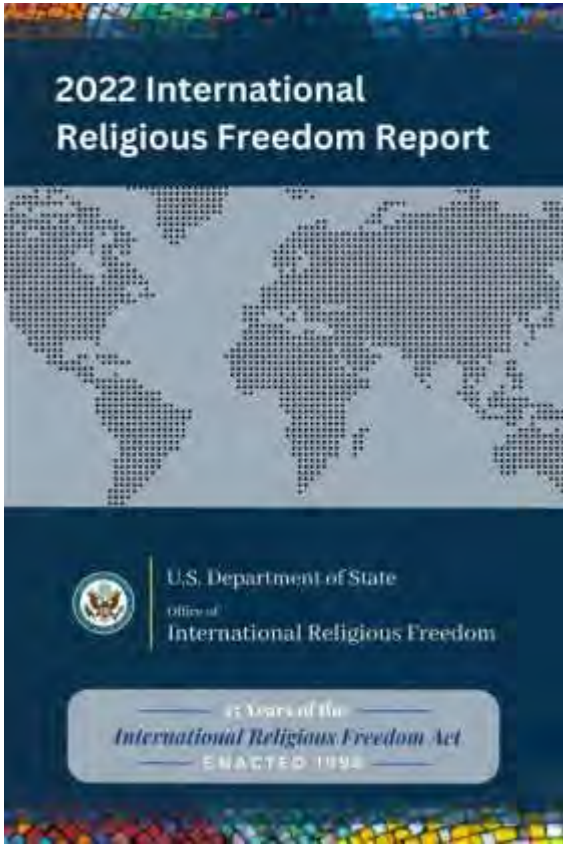
Not only that, the story told by the leftwing activist lawyers that "cults are dangerous", clearly was allowed to colour the articles of many a Japanese journalist and editor. And they printed the extreme claims unquestioningly even though those claims came from a body founded in order to destroy the [Unification Church](#), now called the [Family Federation](#).



Masumi Fukuda

Award-winning Japanese investigative journalist Masumi Fukuda makes this perfectly clear,

"Almost all of the lawyers in the Network were affiliated with the former Socialist Party and the Communist Party, who strongly opposed the enactment of the Anti-Espionage Law, were connected with extremist groups and North Korea, and were ideologically leftists and self-styled atheists. In contrast, the former [Unification Church](#) is an anti-communist and conservative organization that opposes atheism. It is clear that this was an ideological battle between the two camps." (The Truth About the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales, article by Masumi Fukuda in the monthly magazine Hanada, republished in English in Bitter Winter 30th March 2023)



Rhodes describes his disappointment that such extreme anti-religious claims from a body initiated by communists were given abundant space in the US Department of State's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report. He writes,

"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."

Rhodes describes this as disappointing lack of action taken by the United States, "the champion of religious freedom around the world". Last year's report on the condition for religious freedom globally was however exceptionally "soft" on Japan, even though the Japanese government clearly has done its part to create what leading religious freedom expert Massimo Introvigne calls "the most dramatic religious liberty crisis in a democratic country."

In spite of serious issues with freedom of faith in Japan, the country has been dealt with in an unusually soft manner. Rhodes, and Introvigne attribute this to political bias as Japan is one of the key allies of the USA in the Far East.



Rhodes is also critical of Freedom House, the Washington DC based non-governmental organization that measures the degree of civil liberty in each nation. The US human rights expert claims that Freedom House bypassed the Japanese "government's threat to religious freedom in its report."

Because of the lack of reaction by the United States and the international human rights community, Rhodes fears that the Japanese government may face little criticism even though it continues to ignore the constitutionally granted religious freedom of a religious minority.

And this may well become a much larger problem and affect other religious minorities not only in Japan, but potentially around the world. As Rhodes emphasizes,

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

Featured image above: Dr. Aaron Rhodes, executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 1993-2007. Photo: [Bitter Winter](#)

More about threat to religious freedom: [Japan Given Bottom Rank](#)



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## OPINION

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# Japan's Threat to International Religious Freedom

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Aaron Rhodes




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.







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

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.

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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'is and others. And if any Western state raises alarm about such abuses

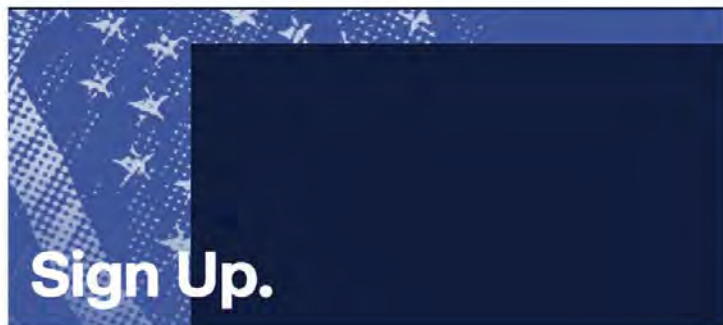


Jews, the Dalai Lama and others. And if any western state raises alarm about such abuses, the abusers could point to Japan's overlooked violations and call them hypocritical.

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](#)."

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