

Religious Oppression in the Japanese Media from a Journalist's Perspective

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Thank you for inviting me to this fascinating discussion, and it's a complex and difficult one too.

Thank you Mr Kondo for those devastating stories that you just told us and we've heard during this session.

These sessions that from big figures of high stature about what has been unfolding democracy, human rights, religious persecution. There are 6 000 households in Japan who part of the movement, and I've spoken to several members in recent months, and as the media storm has intensified my thoughts are very much with those families. But I want to start with a question. What are we really talking about when we talk about the Unification Church in Japan? We have heard a hint at those answers on the big issues of the former speakers. But how did that needle of anger and blame move so abruptly from the killer of Shinzo Abe towards the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) which get shorted in the media to the Unification Church and for its detractors to the Moonies and cultism?

I've worked with the Church and some of its NGO affiliates since the mid-1990s when they helped me lead a BBC crew into North Korea. We kept in touch. I've spoken at events like these and I should say that not once have I been told what to say and never have I been close to any ethical journalistic line that I would refuse to cross. I can also say that the work the Church did in the 1990s helped bring about a peace deal that took the prospect of war off the table on the Korean Peninsula and it's been doing similar work since. Now, as a journalist I have an eye for following the trajectory of a story and this one is very strange. A charismatic former Prime Minister charting a future course for Japan is murdered by a disgruntled man with a homemade gun.

The debate though does not focus on say 'Mental health challenges in Japanese society' as it does on gun control in America after a mass shooting there. The story is now firmly embedded on the Unification Church and the decades old-festering grievance that the killer's mother made donations that she could not afford. Yes, it was a lot of money. How did the church take it?

Brainwashing? coercion? What is it doing about it? Now all these are good questions. But are they enough to cause the political crisis currently rippling through the Japanese government? And how unique among religious organizations are these alleged practices in the Unification Church? The Japan Times ran the result of a survey looking into second generation followers of religious organizations in Japan: 428 of *Soka Gakkai*, Japan's largest Buddhist group, also closely connected with the LDP, 168 from the

Americanbased Jehovah's Witnesses, 47 from the Unification Church. More than 30% of the respondents there said they were urged by their religious affiliations to attend election campaign rallies for certain candidates, while over 20% said that it was their parents that did the urging. Now, there's nothing new in that. Links between church, politics and government happens all over the church. Sri Lankan politicians and the Buddhist clergy, the Northern Ireland conflict, in Britain where I am, is all about rival strands of the Christian religion. I did a documentary, filmed a documentary for the BBC on a mega church in Ohio (USA) that was showing off the Senators from Washington DC traveling there to Sunday worship. In the Philippines, Protestant Christian groups when I was there as the correspondent from America were building churches in remote Catholic area [...] to what's similar in the Cold War in Latin America and there's been a lot of blood spilled in those places. So, what are the politics here? The Unification Church is unashamedly conservative and anti-communist if those are the right words in today's shifting ground as political speak. It owns for example the Washington Times with strong connections to America Republican party and values as we've seen with the former speakers here. No secret there. Nor in secret but those that think it's way of doing things might be a little odd, the mass weddings are there for all of us to see. Why is the Church then so intricately connected to a Prime Minister's plunging poll ratings?

Who is driving the campaign to have the Church's wings clipped or shut down? We've had a few answers to that amongst the speakers already. There's been a shocking murder leaving a nation grasping for an explanation.

The media has pounced as it does and it's unlikely to let go. And as the saying goes a rumor can get halfway around the world before the truth gets its boots on. The media in Japan has been relentless in covering this issue with some 830 television programs in the past four months, most of them with the angles that I've outlined. Some 5,500 online articles using terminology that I've referred to earlier, such as cultism and brainwashing, have been constant there painting an image of an organization as being anti-social. And we've heard from the many speakers here [that] the more balanced story needs to be told and that is a bigger picture amid the allegations and counter-allegations coming out. This is a picture of a political global situation that we've heard a bit about. Shinzo Abe led a new agenda on Japan's role in this changing world. The country is a shining example of the American mentor democracy in an Asian society. It is the bedrock of the United States Indo-Pacific policy. Authoritarian nations, China and Russia, who antagonistic neighbors whose interests lie in having Japan less reliant and less compliant with America and its values. Now, I don't know what and if there to that. That means a lot of journalistic digging to get into it. And that's what I would urge my colleagues to do. Because if a homemade gun killing, a personal grievance and a relatively small religious organization can shake Japan to such a degree it is tile to ask these big uncomfortable questions. So here now, as Japan charts its future, let us ask what are we really talking about when we talk about the Unification Church in Japan? Thank you very much.