

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Pathetic Tokyo Copying Authoritarian States

Knut Holdhus
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Doug Bandow speaking at a conference on religious freedom in South Korea 12th November 2022

American author maintains Kishida administration does a huge mistake in copying authoritarian states and banning religion.



The conservative American magazine *The American Spectator*, which normally covers news and politics, carried on 6th March 2024 an in-depth report titled "[Unlikely Persecutor: Japan Threatens to Shut Unification Church](#)". It was penned by Doug Bandow, American political author and Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington DC libertarian think tank.

The article subtitled "Religious liberty is at stake", points out Japan appears to be "a vibrant, free environment for people of all faiths." It has 180,000 registered faith societies with religious corporation status that enjoy government tax benefits.

Still, as Bandow emphasizes, recent developments may well lead to serious infringements on that liberty for more than one religious body. The Kishida administration has requested Tokyo District Court to issue a dissolution order against the [Family Federation](#), formerly called the [Unification Church](#). The court hearings [began on 22nd February](#).



Sign at the entrance of the headquarters of the [Family Federation](#) of Japan in Shibuya, Tokyo

The *American Spectator* warns,

"In effect, Japan's democratic government would be impeding an international [church](#) with thousands of adherents from operating in its territory. Doing so also would create a legal weapon for use against other churches, especially ones disdained for being unconventional or targeted for being controversial."

Bandow describes how the anti-religious activists behind much of the persecution in the USA used horrendous methods against what was then called the [Unification Church](#),

"[...] for a time, the [church](#) gained unwanted attention from anti-cult activists and organizations. Although critics complained of high-pressure conversion tactics, the response - literally kidnapping new adherents, forcibly confining them, and browbeating them to give up their stated beliefs - was much worse. The controversy eventually disappeared and is largely forgotten today."

Anti-religious activists orchestrating most of the persecution in Japan used those same methods, that became illegal in the USA and succeeded spreading a false narrative to the media. This in fact helped Tetsuya Yamagami, the 41-year-old who assassinated former prime minister Shinzo Abe, get his objectives realized. As Bandow writes,

"[...] but the murderer achieved his larger goal of injuring the [Unification Church](#). The ruling Liberal Democratic Party stuck with an unpopular prime minister and poor poll ratings, decided to scapegoat the organization. It launched an investigation and, last year, proposed closing the [church](#). Only two other

churches have ever lost their religious status, one of which was the Aum Shinrikyo cult which staged a deadly Sarin attack on the Japanese metro in 1995. Today the case grinds on, with Tokyo attempting to do what authoritarian states routinely do, punish religious organizations out of public or government favor."

The American author is convinced that Tokyo's plan to shut down the [church](#) is misguided for several reasons.

First, the legal system has previously proven effective in addressing similar issues. The problem of alleged pressured donations extends beyond Japan and the [Unification Church](#), and specialized legal mechanisms have been developed in Japan to handle such cases. Assassin Yamagami's grievance goes back more than 20 years and revolves around his belief that his mother's contributions to the [church](#) impoverished the family. However, half of the money was returned in 2009, and it appears that the assassin failed to convince his mother of any mistreatment as she remains a member of the [church](#). Furthermore, [church](#) practices have evolved over time, and until recently, fundraising tactics were not considered a political issue. Bandow points out that fundraising tactics,

"certainly were not seen as a problem that could not be resolved through normal legal means. It is bizarre to propose the most serious penalty imaginable, organizational destruction, based on complaints that are decades old."



The second reason Bandow gives is what appears to be a politically motivated prosecution, with attacks coming from two widely different camps - the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). A journalist from the JCP's daily Shimbun Akahata (Red Flag) wrote in November 2022,

"From the Communist Party's point of view, this is the final war against the [Unification Church](#)."

The LDP, in particular, faces scrutiny due to its historical ties with the [Unification Church](#), and the public backlash against the LDP's influence-peddling has led to blaming the [church](#) for its actions. However, this campaign is not driven by a pursuit of justice but rather by political agendas.



Fumio Kishida 14th July 2022

Doug Bandow also gives a third reason the Kishida administration's efforts to shut down the [Unification Church](#) is misguided: Even allegations of high-pressure fundraising do not warrant the [church](#)'s closure, especially since the [church](#) has not been accused of criminal conduct. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida initially acknowledged that civil charges alone could not justify a shutdown before reversing his stance. Additionally, there is no substantial evidence suggesting that current or future complaints cannot be addressed through existing legal procedures.

If closure were ever justified for abusive practices, it would have been in cases of child abuse by Catholic priests, which involved criminal acts and systematic cover-ups by church leaders. However, even in those egregious cases, defrocking Catholic organizations was not seriously considered.

The fourth reason Bandow points out is that setting a precedent of closing down a [church](#) could have far-reaching consequences, potentially targeting other organizations based on dubious claims. This could undermine legitimate organizations and impede alternative means of addressing grievances, posing more harm than good. Doug Bandow explains,

"Some observers have suggested that the next target could be Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist movement that also has been called a cult. Except Soka Gakkai created the Komeito political party, which is in coalition with the ruling LDP and is therefore unlikely to be dissolved. Any large organization is likely to engage in some dubious practices that could become an excuse for punitive action. To pile civil claims upon one another, ignore alternative means of resolving legitimate complaints, and undermine otherwise legitimate organizations would threaten more harm than good."

Attempting to close the [Unification Church](#) is particularly ill-advised when dealing with matters of religious faith, which warrant special protection from political interference. While Japan is not a country that mandates state-supported religion, the attempt to close the [church](#) represents an overreach of government authority for political gain.

The demagogic nature of the LDP's campaign is evident in the public sympathy for Abe's alleged assassin and the backlash against the victim. Japan, as a democracy that upholds the rule of law, has a

responsibility to address abuses within religious organizations without resorting to discriminatory or punitive measures. Closing down the [church](#) should not be used as a pretext for such actions.

Doug Bandow served as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is also the author of "Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics" and "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire".

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CHURCH AND STATE

Unlikely Persecutor: Japan Threatens to Shut Unification Church

Religious liberty is at stake.



by DOUG BANDOW

March 6, 2024, 9:41 PM



Statue of Christ, Buddha, and Confucius outside of the Unification Church headquarters in Seoul, South Korea (Kushiro K/Shutterstock)



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I've just returned from a conference on religious persecution. Held in the Mediterranean, the event covered the status of religious liberty in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In general, the status of religious minorities in that region ranges from bad to horrendous.

Japan tends to be at the opposite end of the spectrum. The U.S. State Department's most recent [report](#) on religious liberty in the country observed: "The constitution provides for freedom of religion and prohibits religious organizations from exercising any political authority or receiving privileges from the state. According to the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA), there are approximately 180,000 registered religious organizations with corporate status that received government tax benefits." That sounds like a vibrant, free environment for people of all faiths. (READ MORE: [Rapidly Declining Mainline Church Seeks to Require Ministers to Support Transgenderism, Gay Marriage](#))

However, a Tokyo court recently [held its first hearing](#) "on the government's request to issue an order to dissolve the controversial Unification Church over its aggressive donation solicitation practices." In theory, if disenfranchised, the church could [reorganize and operate](#) as a private corporation, but it would be placed at a significant disadvantage compared to other religious organizations. In effect, Japan's democratic government would be impeding an international church with thousands of adherents from operating in its territory. Doing so also would create a legal weapon for use against other churches, especially ones disdained for being unconventional or targeted for being controversial.

Faithful Christians?

The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification Church was founded by Rev. Sun Myung Moon and his wife, Hak Ja Han, in South Korea in 1954. They moved to the U.S. in 1971, and for a time the church gained unwanted attention from anti-cult activists and organizations. Although critics complained of high-pressure conversion tactics, the response — literally [kidnapping new adherents](#), forcibly confining them, and browbeating them to give up their stated beliefs — was much worse. The controversy eventually disappeared and is largely forgotten today.

The faith did not grow as hoped in the U.S. and the church's financial heart remained Japan. There the complaint against the Unification

Church had to do with its high-pressure fundraising tactics. A surge in lawsuits sought to recover prior donations but diminished over time. Of late little seemed amiss until 2022, when a disturbed 41-year-old man murdered former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The reason? Anger over the church, which had received substantial contributions from the killer's mother. The shooter said his real targets were Abe's long-dead grandfather and Hak Ja Han. "I fired the gun, thinking that it cannot be helped even if it resulted in Abe's death," he declared.

None of this made much sense, but the murderer achieved his larger goal of injuring the Unification Church. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party stuck with an unpopular prime minister and poor poll ratings, decided to scapegoat the organization. It launched an investigation and, last year, proposed closing the church. Only two other churches have ever lost their religious status, one of which was the AUM Shinrikyo cult which staged a deadly Sarin attack on the Japanese metro in 1995. Today the case grinds on, with Tokyo attempting to do what authoritarian states routinely do, punish religious organizations out of public or government favor.

The Unification Church, early on perhaps most identified publicly by the mass weddings conducted by Moon, has long generated public controversy. Not that the church is unique in this way. Almost every religion looks ridiculous or inappropriate to others at times. Some of the complaints, such as parents pressing their kids to remain celibate until marriage and participate in a mass wedding, differ little from criticism of other strict faiths that demand celibacy and promote arranged marriages. Doctrinally the faith is an offshoot of Christianity. Politically it emphasized anti-communism during the Cold War. Organizationally it broke apart after Moon died in 2012 leaving family members at odds with one another. Following all the details can be taxing. However, they don't matter in deciding whether the government should shut down the church. It should not.

I first learned about the faith from a reporter for the church's New York City newspaper, which unabashedly promoted the church and sent a reporter to accompany the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign, of which I was a part. It was hard to be involved in right-leaning politics and not run into the church for a time. I contributed columns to the church-owned *Washington Times*, for years a major force within the conservative movement, and traveled on a couple of international junkets organized by the World Media Association, also run by the church. In recent years I've cooperated on religious liberty and Korean issues with a church-oriented foundation. In practice, for me the experience has been no different than writing for publications, appearing on shows, and speaking at events organized by other faith organizations.

In Japan, the Unification Church did engage in fundraising practices that appear unfair, even abusive. However, most of its dubious practices were dealt with more than a decade ago. Church authorities say they added additional attention after Abe's assassination. Nothing about the organization today warrants shutting down the church, which, despite being unconventional, unquestionably constitutes a vibrant faith community (whose members tend to be derided as "Moonies"). The Unification Church ain't my preference — I attend a conventional nondenominational Christian fellowship — but that shouldn't be the legal standard for prohibition.

Shutting Down the Church Doesn't Solve a Problem

Tokyo's shutdown plan is misguided. First, the legal system proved adequate to deal with earlier problems. The issue of donations under pressure reaches well beyond Japan and the Unification Church. In America, family members often worry about choices freely, if perhaps unwisely, made by their elders. In Japan, a specialized bar was developed to handle such cases. The killer's complaint dated back *two decades*, when, he contended, his mother's contributions to the church left the family in poverty. However, half of the money was returned in 2009. It doesn't appear that he ever convinced his mother that she had been mistreated since she is still a church member.

Moreover, as noted earlier, church practices changed. Until Abe's assassination, fundraising tactics were not a political issue; they certainly were not seen as a problem that could not be resolved through normal legal means. It is bizarre to propose the most serious penalty imaginable, organizational destruction, based on complaints that are decades old.

Second, the prosecution is highly political. Oddly, the attacks come from two vastly different directions. One is the Japanese Communist Party. Communists certainly know a lot about abusing the public — in China, North Korea, the Soviet Union, and wherever else they have come to power. Moon, who was born in North Korea, made his political name by resisting communism (though starting in the 1990s he worked to bridge the gap between the two Koreas). Japan's communists have never achieved much influence on their own, but present efforts also have been pressed by a coterie of left-wing attorneys. One activist observed: "From the Communist Party's point of view, this is the final war against the Unification Church."

The other combatant is the Liberal Democratic Party, under fire for its past association with the Unification Church — as of 2022 nearly half its diet members had had some contact with the church — and fearing for its future hold on government. The public was angry at the LDP's influence-peddling, especially since the church used true but embarrassing war-guilt themes in fundraising. Rather than take responsibility for its actions, LDP blamed the church. The current campaign is not about justice. A democratic government should exhibit a higher standard than that of authoritarian countries where religious persecution is rife.

Third, even at their height, claims of high-pressure fundraising didn't justify closure. Notably, the church was not accused of criminal conduct. Even Prime Minister Fumio Kishida initially allowed that civil charges could not justify a shutdown, before making a convenient U-turn. Nor has serious evidence been presented that current or future complaints can't be dealt with through normal procedures.

If there were ever a case for shutting a church for abusive practices, it would have been the horrendous child abuse by some Catholic priests. These were criminal acts with offenders sometimes shielded from accountability by their superiors. Too often Church leaders refused to take swift and tough action against offenders. Ultimately, the church paid a very high price, both financially and reputationally. But, no one seriously suggested defrocking Catholic organizations. That was the correct decision, even though these abuses were much greater than anything charged against the Unification Church in Japan.

Fourth, the precedent of closing a church would be terrible. Some observers have suggested that the next target could be Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist movement that also has been called a cult. Except Soka Gakkai created the Komeito political party, which is in coalition with the ruling LDP and is therefore unlikely to be dissolved. Any large organization is likely to engage in some dubious practices that could become an excuse for punitive action. To pile civil claims upon one another, ignore alternative means of resolving legitimate complaints, and undermine otherwise legitimate organizations would threaten more harm than good.

A Foolish Course for Japan

Such a course would be particularly foolish, even reckless when dealing with religious faith. People's response to the transcendent deserves special protection from political interference. The U.S. has the First Amendment, which helps protect spiritual practices. Other nations, even other Western democracies, do not, and today we sometimes see woke liberalism used to assault historic churches. The campaign in Japan is an exaggerated version of this tactic.

Japan is neither Saudi Arabia nor China. It does not demand that its people worship a state-supported religion or put their faith aside. Nevertheless, the attempt to close the Unification Church is unwarranted. It greatly extends the government's role in a fundamental matter of faith, and does so for shameless political ends.

The demagogic character of the LDP campaign is demonstrated by how Abe's murderer has bizarrely become a public hero of sorts. Reports journalist Robert Worth:

As information about Yamagami's personal history and the LDP's role became more widely known, a strange inversion took place: People began expressing sympathy for the alleged assassin and anger at the victim. A Japanese weekly devoted a cover story to the swooning fans known as "Yamagami Girls" and other supporters. Well-wishers began sending Yamagami gifts. Thousands of people protested the decision to grant Abe a state funeral, and a hastily made feature film that portrayed Yamagami as a tragic hero was shown all over the country.

Japan purports to be a democracy that protects the rule of law. It has a responsibility to act accordingly. As Worth observed, "Because the group's leaders have not been charged with any crime, the Japanese government would, in essence, be asserting the power to decide when a religion does more harm than good." That is not a judgment any government should make about any church. If a religious organization behaves badly, the government should address the abuses and hold those responsible accountable. Tokyo should not use the issue as a pretext to discriminate and punish.

Doug Bandow is a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is also the author of Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics and Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.





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Alan Stevens

3 days ago

My mother attended a Unification Church for several months.

She said it was the biggest non-church she had ever seen.

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