

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: States Posing Danger To Minority Religions

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Dr. Eileen Barker 12th April 2024 during the online conference on "Peace and Public Leadership: Addressing the Challenges of Our Times"

Leading academic warns of today's changed situation where states are possibly the greatest threat to minority religions

A comment by Dr. Eileen Barker, Emeritus professor, London School of Economics; Chairperson and Founder, Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM). The comment was made during Session V, "New Religious Movements and Contemporary Threats to Religious Freedom", 12th April 2024, the second day of an international online 3-day conference on "Peace and Public Leadership: Addressing the Challenges of Our Times", organized by HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership, New York, USA.

Dr. Barker was asked by the moderator of the panel discussion, Dr. Franco Famularo,

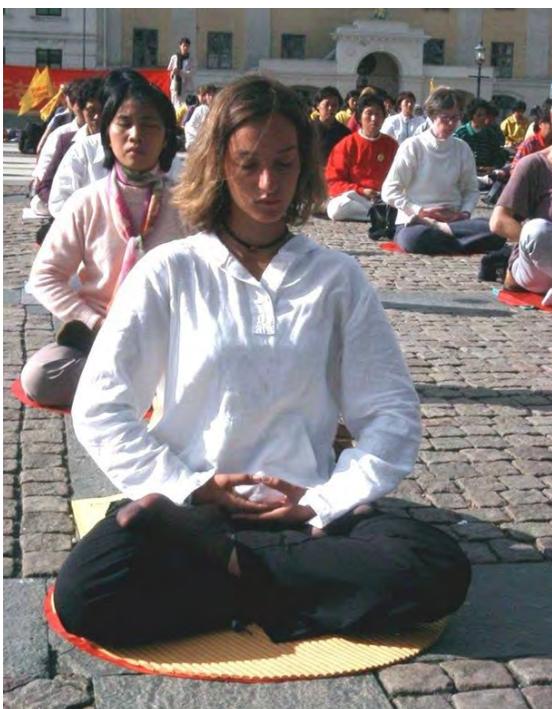
"But what threats to new or minority religious movements have you witnessed? Is it more serious in the 21st century? Or was it worse in the decades prior to now? And what lessons can we learn from the past that can be applied today?"

It's different. There are different fears, there are different contexts.

Lots of things don't happen at the individual level now. For example, you don't get deprogramming in the way that you did in the seventies, when it was done without anybody objecting, really. It was just taken for granted.

Now it's far more that the state is a danger.

What's happening is that there is the labeling, not just of "cults", but "xie-jiao" (邪教) in China, which means "unorthodox heresy" or something like that, but which is translated as "evil cult".



Labeled as "evil cult" in China - Falun Gong. Here adherents meditating in November 2007

And once a religion is labeled that way, this gives the state permission to treat it not as a religion. I got into trouble in China, mainland China, for calling Falun Gong a religion. And it was explained to me that it wasn't a religion, it was a xie-jiao and part of the list, like the list [list of new religious movements

labelled as "cults" by anti-cultists] they have in France.

And that meant it was not a religion. So it wasn't subject to religious freedom and the rights of a religion.



Labeled as extremist: Here, a public warning against the Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Torzhok in Tver Oblast, Russia in 2012. The headline says "Caution, sect!!!" The text goes on to say, "Brothers and sisters! As became known recently, near the walls of our holy monastery, followers of the sect Jehovah's Witnesses secretly preach their teachings. Be careful and vigilant! Don't let yourself be fooled! You can get answers to all questions about faith and the Church from the brotherhood of the monastery at any time and every Sunday within the framework of Boris-Glebsk conversations."

And similarly, in Russia, if you're labeled, or your literature is labeled, as extremist, this means that you are criminal. And just by definition, by the labeling.

So, I think that's something that has happened. It's getting more systematic.

In Britain, I would say that we're pretty free. There are problems, but the Northern Ireland situation meant that we introduced laws that forbade certain movements because they were terrorists, in Northern Ireland, and there were a few that were labelled terrorist organizations, therefore weren't subject to [rights to operate freely]. Now, that was okay. Nobody liked terrorists.

But what happened was that this meant that the door was open to saying, you're defined in one way, and therefore you're not subject to religious freedom. So religious rights and religious freedoms are taken away.

But on the other hand, there are reasons for hope, I think. People will say, even if they don't

practise it, that all people are equal. It isn't acceptable to behave in the way you did in calling people racist names. LGBT people, sexual discrimination, gender discrimination, all these things are discussed. They're not all solved, but they're discussed.

And there's an awareness that there wasn't 50 years ago when it was just taken for granted that at least in a large number of societies, certain types of people were inferior.

Now, you may still believe it, and you may still try and do something about it, but you'll be challenged, I think, because of the work of people like my co-panelists today - Katrina [Katrina Lantos Swett] and her organization and people like Massimo [Massimo Introvigne], who's a fantastic advocate for religious freedom - people can't get away with it so easily.

But the situation isn't getting all that much better because there are new ways being found of taking people's freedom away.

"States Posing a Danger to Minority Religions" - slightly edited version of comment by Dr. Eileen Barker 12th April 2024.

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Opposition Inciting Regime To Excessive Steps

February 18, 2024 • Knut Holdhus

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by the Editorial Department of Sekai Nippo

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The government changing the interpretation of the *Religious Corporations Act* naturally **affects all religious corporations.**

Previously, the interpretation of the requirements for a dissolution order for a religious corporation explicitly stated that it must have engaged in acts falling under Article 81, Paragraph 1, Item 1 of the same law, namely, “acts that violate prohibitory norms or directive norms established by statutory laws such as the *Penal Code*, and moreover, it is clearly recognized that such acts significantly harm the public welfare,” along with Item 2, which states “acts that are recognized as significantly deviating from the purposes of religious corporations stipulated in Article 2 of the *Religious Corporations Act*” (Tokyo High Court, 19th December 1995).



Front page of 2018 English version of *Religious Corporations Act of Japan*.

However, the interpretation of Item 1 was **suddenly changed overnight** under the Fumio Kishida cabinet to include “unlawful acts under the Civil Code” (19th October 2022, *House of Councillors Budget Committee*, response from Prime Minister Kishida).

The right to ask questions in order to request a dissolution order has been expanded. All at once, it became possible to exercise this right not only against the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), but also against **all other religious corporations**. This only **strengthened the state's power over religion**. According to statistics from the *Religious Affairs Division* of the *Agency for Cultural Affairs*, there are approximately 180,000 religious corporations and a religious population of 180 million individuals in Japan. That exceeds the population of Japan. In other words, it **affects the majority of the population**.



Satoshi Hamada in Dec. 2023. Photo: Tamiron / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain image](#). Cropped

However, such a significant change in the legal interpretation was **made by a limited number of people within the government**. In Prime Minister Kishida's response to the written question from *House of Councilors* member Satoshi Hamada (浜田聡) (31st January), he **did not disclose the details of the cabinet's decision** or internal government deliberations (9th February).

So far, the

opposition parties, that should have been vigilant about “state power”, have not raised any issues regarding this matter. In the *Budget Committee of the House*



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of Councillors, Constitutional Democratic Party lawmaker Hiroyuki Konishi (小西洋之), who elicited a change in interpretation from the Prime Minister, said, "Changing one's interpretation overnight is excessive." Konishi did not however pursue the matter further regarding the change in interpretation.



Hiroyuki Konishi in March 2020. Photo: 石垣のりこ / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 3.0 Unp. Cropped

Later, Konishi said at a talk event in August 2023,

"I suggested to Kishida, 'You can say you've changed your mind, and that **civil law torts can also be applied**. If you do that, I won't pursue that part.' And Prime Minister Kishida said exactly that."

The video of this was spread on X (formerly Twitter). The opposition parties, which often chant slogans such as "We won't tolerate government excesses," were the ones who **incited the government's excesses**.

During the debate over the security legislation in 2015, the main opposition party at the time was the *Democratic Party* [民主党, Minshutō – a centrist to centre-left liberal party in Japan from 1998 to 2016]. It fiercely opposed the Cabinet decision that changed the interpretation of the constitution to allow limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense, and were hostile to then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, accusing him of "Abe politics". Within the parliament, they employed delay tactics, and outside, they held protest demonstrations almost every day.

In the "Opposition Coalition" then the *Democratic Party* **cooperated with the Communist Party** with the aim of potentially sharing power with it. That coalition began with the justification of revoking the Cabinet decision that serves as the basis for the security legislation. The "Opposition Coalition" now, on the other hand, provided support for flawed procedures, such as the lack of a Cabinet decision regarding the interpretation change of the *Religious Corporations Act*, which could potentially **undermine the guarantee of freedom of religion** as stipulated in the constitution.

The political forces that make up the "Opposition Coalition" share the same view as defendant Tetsuya Yamagami (山上徹也), who shot Shinzo Abe, that "Abe and the former **Unification Church** were close." After the shooting incident, they opposed Abe's state funeral and criticized the "contacts" between the *Liberal Democratic Party* and the former **Unification Church** as well as groups associated with it, such as the *International Federation for Victory Over Communism*. While using this as material to attack the conservative politics of the Abe administration, it can be said to have encouraged the exercise of the right to question the former **Unification Church** in order to request an order to dissolve it.



Shinzo Abe March 2022. Photo: English: United States Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel / Wikimedia Commons. Public domain image. Cropped

However, democracy emphasizes the importance of procedures. Is there no problem with that?

Before the war, the opposition party had caused the military to go out of control. In the Imperial Diet [Parliament] of 1930, the opposition party, the Rikken Seiyukai (立憲政友会 – *Association of Friends of Constitutional Government*), attempted to corner the civilian government led by Prime Minister Osachi Hamaguchi (濱口 雄幸) of the *Rikken Minseitō* party by pursuing accusations of having "absconded the right to command" at the *London Naval Disarmament Conference*. The dissatisfaction with disarmament stimulated the public sentiment and the media, and the atmosphere of the times

could no longer be prevented from heading towards war. Isn't there a resemblance to the ruling and opposition parties, and the media, in their pursuit of dissolution requests?

Featured image above: *Fumio Kishida and opposition communist Kazuo Shii. In the Japanese Diet building 30th March 2020, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida receiving the Japanese Communist Party's proposals regarding Japan-China relations from Kazuo Shii, chairman of the Japanese Communist Party (JPC).* Photo: [首相官邸ホームページ](#) License: [CC Attr 4.0 Int.](#) Cropped

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